

MY GOTHIC ROMANCE

by

J. C. Clover-Cook



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Chapter One

"Sex," says my agent into the telephone with a tired sounding voice, "sells."

I am not surprised by his drowsiness. The digital clock on my night stand says it is four a.m. eastern standard time, so it is safe to assume (since he also lives in New York City) that he says the same and that he was sleeping when I called. The reason then for his tired sounding voice is obvious, but I am absolutely bemused by his statement. "Sex - cells?" I say.

"Yes," he replies, for he misinterprets my meaning much the same way that I misunderstood his reply to my original question, which was an urgent request for literary advice. At four o'clock in the morning the margin for misunderstanding was too wide for either one of us it would seem, and that homonym could have led to further confusion if it wasn't for the following: "What do ovum and spermatozoon have to do with the fact that I want to write a best-selling novel?" I ask him.

"What are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You asked me what sells, so I told you - sex."

Realizing my mistake at last, I laugh out loud. "Well, those weren't my exact words. I asked you what type of book has the best chance of making it in today's market?"

It is his turn to laugh, and it is the underlying dreariness of his laughter that causes me to become guilt-ridden. "I meant write a book about sex," he says sluggishly. "A romance novel," he explains with a yawn.

"A romance novel? Are you sure?"

"Of course not. There are no guarantees in this business. What's hot one day is not the next."

"And vice versa, I suppose, but I want to write something that has universal appeal.

Something so sensational everyone in the world will run amok to read it. A book that people on their way home from work will be unable to pass by when they see it displayed in a store window. A book with a storyline so spellbinding readers all over the world will not be able to put it down when they are ready for bed." And finally even I am surprised to hear myself say, "A book with a perfect plot, consummate characters, and with such impeccable prose people will fawn over it for centuries to come." The work involved in fulfillment of such a statement would undoubtedly be the quintessential challenge for any writer, so I am aghast at myself for having said it.

My agent is quiet for the longest time and the silence on the other end of the phone tells me that either he too is aghast and does not know what to say, or else he has fallen to sleep? "Mr. Morris, are you still with me?"

"Yeah, I'm awake and thanks to you I will be for the rest of the night."

"I'm sorry, sir, but as you know I've tried my best to write the great global novel that will change the entire world for the better. Now, I am ready to write trash if that is what it takes to become a best-selling author." And to vindicate myself to you readers I must inform you of my motive. My publisher, fed up and frustrated over the pitiful sales of my most recent novel, threatened to drop me from his list of clients if I don't become less "literary" and more "commercial." He also suggested (strangely enough) that I write a romance novel, which is why, suffering from insomnia, as I so often do, I picked up the phone in a frenzy and frantically called my agent, Mr. Morris, in the middle of the night.

Now when he finally stops snickering, over the statement I just made about my willingness to

write trash, he says, "I'm just letting you know what the public wants. You asked. Turn on the TV and what do you see? Sex. There isn't a movie made without at least one scintillating sex scene. The music industry knows that sex is the thing most often on the minds of the mainstream. Look at Madonna. She's cornered the sexual market. She's the media master."

"She's much more than that," I say sharply, being as I am one of her biggest fans. "Atop of being an all-around incredible talent, the certified sex symbol of the century, she is also a revolutionist."

"That may be, but Madonna is also a controversial figure, and if you want to be mass market keep controversy out of the book."

"Considering my track record for writing books with taboo topics that may not be an easy task."

"You won't know until you try," he tells me.

"I do want to be commercial, at least more commercial than I am, but are you saying that I J.C. Clover-Cook should stoop so low as to write about some breathtakingly beautiful woman with a big bust who falls madly and passionately in love with a well endowed man who has a mustache?"

"No mustache. Make him clean shaven."

"What difference does a mustache make?" I demand to know.

"There are a lot of women who may fancy a mustache on a man, yet there aren't too many women who will dislike a man if he doesn't have one. On the other hand there are many women out there in the market place who don't like men with mustaches."

"You're making this impossible. You can't please everyone," I inform him.

"Maybe not, J.C., but if you're careful and clever you can please the majority."

"If you say so, but it sounds awfully cold-hearted to me, not to mention artistically unfulfilling."

"It's a cruel world, especially when neurotic novelists call me up in the middle of the night to complain."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep. Do you have any suggestions on how I should start?"

"You're supposed to be the creative genius. Use your imagination. Good night."

"Wait, one more thing before you hang up. What is the difference between passion and pornography?"

"Ask Madonna," is his joking reply.

"Seriously, what is the difference?"

"I don't know. Read a couple of romance novels. Research the subject," he suggests.

"I would rather read the obituaries in the New York Times backwards."

"Suit yourself," he says.

"Are you telling me that I have to write a gushing love story saturated with one sex scene after another?"

"If you want the book to sell you do."

"Am I allowed to use big words like "intercourse?"

"Keep it simple," he says.

"And corny," I sarcastically add.

"Romantic," he replies, "for the weak of heart."

"Right," I reply cynically for all the realists in the world.

"All I can say, J.C., is that sex sells!"

Chapter Two

One week later, in trying to come up with an idea for a book that will appease my publisher, the public, and my artistic integrity, I remain to be a my wits end. The latter of the three will be the most difficult to fulfill, I realize, and in a rage I hurl the romance novel that I have just finished reading across the room. Before the book became an airborne entity whirling towards the wastebasket it was what the publishing world refers to as a "regency" romance. Prior to it I read a "contemporary" romance, a "historical" romance, a "gothic" romance, and it gives me great joy to tell you now that I hurled them all across the room in much the same manner. The gothic romance was the only one that caused any kind of catastrophe as it collided with my coffee cup, and until this morning when the maid came there had been a stain on the carpet from where the contents of the cup was spilled. I have been told that I have "a terrible temper." Follow me now in fact as I rise to my feet, cross the room resolutely, and bang both of my fists violently down on atop of my writing table. Facing a window and my laptop computer it takes all the willpower I possess to keep myself from picking up the latter and throwing it through the former. Inadvertently I have displayed the fact that I have a destructive disposition as well. Might I mention then that my last novel was lucky to have survived past it's first draft. Pouring a can of lighter fluid on the two hundred page manuscript I planned to drop a lighted match onto the pile of flammable paper as well, and surely I would have set my novel afire if it had not been for the concern of a friend, who appeared in the room at the time of my vengeful rampage. In retrospect, it saddens me to think that my last novel was almost burned. Sadder still is the fact that, in regards to my "terrible temper," I have acquired no more self-control, as you can clearly see for yourself. Today my angry mood is triggered into being by an attack of self-doubt. How can I write a romance novel when I am not an authority in the field of love, nor is my style of writing akin to Romanticism in any respect. I have no notions whatsoever of idealistic love. "No, no matter how hard I try I will never be able to write a romance," I decide, and having said so out loud to myself I snap a pencil in two just to satisfy my desire to destroy something. There is nothing else in the room that calls out for me to wreck havoc upon. The laptop is my lifeblood, so I remain reluctant to ravage it. Breaking pencils, the basic writer's tool, seems an appropriate and an inexpensive way to vent my anger. "Snap. Snap. Snap," is the only sound in my room, and as the pile of broken pencils builds I begin to relax. Having related to you readers the truth about my temper I reserve the right to inform you forthwith that my propensity towards destruction is equaled by my drive to create. It is this one saving grace which allows me to call myself an artist and not just a raving lunatic.

I stop snapping pencils long enough to look out the window and in doing so I am subjected to a marvelous view of Manhattan. I am renting a room at the luxurious Waldorf=Astoria located on Park Avenue. For several months now I have been staying here. My room is on the twenty seventh floor facing east. It is an expensive place to take up residency, but it is well worth the price, and name me a safe hotel in New York City that is not expensive. The other day one of the bellhops told me that the original Waldorf=Astoria stood where the Empire State Building now stands on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 34th Street. From 1893 until 1929, when it moved uptown to make way for the Empire State Building, it had been the lavish hotel for wealthy aristocrats. The new Waldorf=Astoria was built in 1931 between Park Avenue, Lexington

Avenue, and East 50th Street. As lavish as it ever was it continues to cater wholly to wealthy aristocrats. It is forty two stories tall and from top to bottom the palace- like place is the epitome of prestige. The lobby's art deco detail inspires thoughts of grandeur to anyone coming or going. Upon checking in as I did for an indefinite stay I was informed by one of the staff of a fitness center with state of the art equipment, but so far I have never ventured into the facility. Though I would undoubtedly benefit from a regular work out, I prefer to spend my time writing and I take perverse pleasure in watching myself waste away. It seems I can not discipline my mind and my body at the same time. Exercise is something I can only do when I am not writing, and since I am always writing I never exercise. Nothing more need be said about the fitness center or the fact that I am falling apart physically. I am not the object of this book, nor is my neglected body of interest to anyone I am sorry to say. I will surrender to solely say, on the subject of myself, that hotels are my home and they have been for quite some time now. Since becoming a writer mobility has become my best friend. I find travel to be an inspiration beyond measure. Faraway foreign airports, jumbo jets forty thousand feet above the earth, and an endless array of hotel rooms are the closest things to a home that I will ever have, while custom officials, baggage claims, and cab drivers have become my arch enemies the world over. As "a citizen of the world," which is what I consider myself to be, my Samsonite suitcase and a weeks worth of clothing are my only possessions with the exception of my laptop computer. A bohemian lifestyle and being abroad are, as I have said, great sources of inspiration, yet no matter how far I may traverse I always return to my native New York to work on the crux of my novels. The city with all it's diversity, bright lights, culture, and crime, is like no other place on the planet, and it is the opinion of this writer that New York City remains to be a writer's paradise.

My wandering thoughts are presently interrupted by the arrival of one of my many friends - giving you readers a rest from my life story, while at the same time you will gain a great deal of insight into the story forthcoming. The vast majority of my friends are all ghostwriters, who never announce their arrival. They simply show up unexpectedly at their leisure and very often at my expense.

"I see J.C. Clover-Cook is having an artistic temper tantrum today," says my friend, who without knocking waltzes into my hotel room and observes the pile of broken pencils on the plush carpet.

Looking up and away from the window I am not at all surprised to see my guest. "You got here just in time. I'm on my way out."

"Where are you going?" my guest asks.

"I'm going out to look for the man that every heterosexual woman in the world at some point in her life has dreamed about finding."

"Good luck," says my ghostwriter friend with a sardonic grin. This particular writer is a woman and a remarkable one I most readily admit. Her name? Her name is Jane Austen and undoubtedly you have heard of her before. For those of you who haven't heard of her, though I'm sure you are the minority, I will tell you that she is the author of: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. Now, some of you are probably asking yourself didn't she die? Well of course she did. You are absolutely right. She died in the year 1817 on July 18th at four thirty a.m. in her sister Cassandra's arms of an uncommon kind of tuberculosis attacking as it did not her lungs, but her adrenal glands. It seems in 1817 consumption had no name, though later one form of it would be called Addison's Disease, and thanks to the introduction of the drug cortisone in the early 1950's Addison's

Disease is no longer a fatal illness.

So, if Jane Austen did indeed die at the age of forty one of miliary tuberculosis of the adrenal cortex how could she be here with me today?

If you remember I referred to my friends as ghostwriters. She is a ghost and certainly no one can dispute the fact that she is a writer, whom, I am delighted to say, visits me often. For any of you unfamiliar with Jane Austen the woman permit me to give a brief description of her physical appearance. Anyone who has read a biography about the gifted writer will already know that she was and is a tall graceful woman with well proportioned features, bright hazel eyes, and naturally curly brown hair. It is also common knowledge that after dying in her sister's arms she was carried to her grave in Winchester Cathedral by her brothers. Not long after meeting Ms. Austen for the first time (William Faulkner introduced us) she told me all about her family. She talked for nearly two hours about her parents, her closeness to her sister Cassandra, and about her six brothers. She also told me that prior to her death she had never been abroad. 'I never went far from my birthplace. I was never married. I wrote for the pleasure of writing. I adored dancing. I came from the Georgian ere. My name never appeared on any of my books during my lifetime. For the most part only my family knew that I was an author...' are just some of the many things that she has confessed to me over the course of our communion. She has also told me that she hated cities such as Bath, where she once stayed for an extended period of time while still amongst the living. It was not until after she became a ghost that she started to travel the globe. Granted, you will find out most of these particulars for yourself as this story progresses, but before we move on any further I feel obliged to mention more about my numerous ghostwriting friends and their unexpected visitations. If for no other reason than to give you readers an inkling as to some of the characters you are apt to come into direct contact with during the course of this book.

Emily Bronte and her sister Charlotte, the respective authors of Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre are frequent visitors.

Emily Dickinson, the extremely reclusive American poet, who died in 1886, comes occasionally to my hotel room dressed in white, though not because she is a ghost. Two romantic disappointments during her lifetime are the cause of her white attire. To this day, death and disembodiment have done nothing (so far) to alleviate her desire to be alone.

John Steinbeck, who told me he died in New York City, has been another valuable visitor to my hotel room on more than one occasion. He is, in fact, the friend who rescued my manuscript from me in my moment of madness. His timing was impeccable. He appeared in the room and blew out the match I was holding in my hand. "Don't, don't deprive the world of what could possibly be an important piece of art," Mr. Steinbeck said.

I sneered scornfully. "That's easy for you to say, sir, you the author of such classics as The Grapes of Wrath, East of Eden, Of Mice and Men, The Winter of our Discontent, Tortilla Flat..."

After naming only a few of the marvelous books that he wrote in his lifetime he tells me to stop. Impatient with my self- pitying state of mind he makes me put the book of matches down. Then after lecturing me for more than an hour about "the life of a writer" he leaves the same way he came (through the closed door) and then he disappears into the hotel hallway.

Not long after Mr. Steinbeck is gone Thomas Hardy arrives. Mr. Hardy has always been one of my favorite authors, because his Far From the Madding Crowd was one of the first novels I ever read. It is also the only novel of Mr. Hardy's that I have read and he teases me about this fact on every one of his visits. "At least read Jude the Obscure," he has said to me more than once.

"I just haven't found the time," I tell him truthfully, and as tenderly as I can.

"Speaking of time," Mr. Hardy comments, "did you know that it takes me less time to travel from Dorchester, England to the United States than it takes a plane? The fastest supersonic jet can not make the trip across the Atlantic in under a half an hour, which is the length of time it took me today."

"You went back to England since I saw you last?" I inquired, just as another ghost made an inaudible appearance.

"I had to visit some dead relatives," replied Mr. Hardy.

"It only took you half an hour because I showed you a short cut," George Orwell, the newly arrived spirit and another personal favorite of mine, says. He is the author of *Animal Farm*, not to mention the fabulous novel *Ninety Eighty-four*.

I should mention that while Thomas Hardy and George Orwell were talking about travelling from one continent to another and the length of time it takes your average ghost to get from point A to point B, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Herman Melville were all in the room as well. The three world renowned writers had arrived in the middle of Mr. Steinbeck's lecture, but more about them in a moment, for first I must also mention how much it amazes me that when two or more of the ghostwriters get together in my hotel room an argument is sure to arise. It is always fascinating to listen to the opinions of my predecessors, though their egos often get in the way of anything truly insightful. I remember the remark made that day by Herman Melville that triggered such a pompous debate. "*Moby Dick* is the masterpiece above all masterpieces."

"*The Great Gatsby* is the greatest American novel ever written," F. Scott Fitzgerald self-righteously replied.

"Not so, *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *A Farewell to Arms*, are all superior to anything you hacks have ever put on paper," exclaimed who else but Ernest Hemingway.

"Well, you're all wrong. My new novel will be better than all of your books put together," I announced. Of course I was only joking and I am inclined to believe that they were not as serious as they sounded either, for all the ghostwriters got along tremendously well that day, and the competition between them was not as deeply rooted as an onlooker like myself was led to believe by the supercilious statements made during their debate. I suspect it was all quite superficial, and in fact, 'It's the creativity that counts, not the competition,' Sophocles himself had said just in time to confirm my suspicions; and just in time did he walk through a wall to hear the crux of the conversation that was taking place. I could tell that all the ghosts were impressed by his presence, being that he was one of the three great tragic dramatists of ancient Athens; the other two being Aeschylus and Euripides, whose company I have never had the pleasure of partaking.

The highly revered and historically significant Sophocles took a seat on the sofa that glorious ghost filled day between myself and Herman Melville and there he proceeded to tell us all about the fourth century BC. "It's difficult to imagine what the world was like over two thousand years ago," Thomas Hardy commented.

"People were very much the same. A little less civilized on the whole perhaps," Sophocles said, and then he, unlike the majority of the ghosts that I have met so far, turned himself into a solid flesh form. I am told that all the ghosts have the ability to go from a completely transparent apparition to a solid being of flesh and blood, but Sophocles, having been a ghost for far longer than most of the ghostwriters I know, seemed to make the transformation with much more ease. More often than not, however, the ghosts are somewhere between invisible beings and solid

matter, so that someone like myself can see objects on the other side of them, yet at the same time their full form and features are clearly visible. Suffice to say some of the visitations that I receive are more corporeal than others, though the "entities" as I often call my ghostwriter friends, have informed me that no one can see them unless they wish to be seen. Furthermore, when they are in a nebulous state it is impossible, as I found out on one occasion when shaking the hand of Henrik Ibsen, that a living person can pass right through a ghost. I was so startled I stopped mid sentence and have since been unable to tell the Norwegian dramatist how much I admired his play *The Doll House*. Instead, staring in amazement at the seventy five year old man sporting a gray beard and wearing a pair of round little eye- glasses, I screamed and said, "Oh my God, my hand and half of my arm went right through you."

Jane Austen told me that it takes an enormous amount of "etheric energy" for a ghost to manifest itself into a physical form, which brings me back to the present day, for at the moment Jane Austen is the only ghost in my room and as normally is the case with her she is just over the halfway mark of a totally transparent apparition and a completely palpable person.

"I need a hero," I announce to Ms. Austen, who has taken my seat by the window. She is looking eastwardly towards the Random House Building situated on East 50th Street. The prestigious publishing house is only a few buildings away from the Waldorf=Astoria. Their being one of the largest book publishers on the planet and by the expression on Ms. Austen's face I can tell that she is wishing she were able to write another novel. "If only I hadn't died so young. Oh how I wish I were able to write another novel," the look on her face seems to be saying, and then to confirm my suspicions she turns her head, looks directly at me, and with a bitter tone that Jane herself could best describe, she says, "Since my agonizing death, my disembodied spirit craves to be able to write another novel. I would give anything to be able to finish *The Watsons* as I wanted, or *Sanditon*. I have been roaming around the world for nearly two hundred years, and earthbound as I am I have absorbed a warehouse full of information. I have so much more to say. So much more to give to the world. I feel as though I died before I truly began. There are many more books inside of me just waiting to be put down on paper. You don't know how lucky you are, J.C. Oh, but what I would give to be able to feel the joy of creation just one more time."

"Jane," I begin, though I very seldom refer to any of the ghostwriters by their first names. Always I address the ghosts by their surnames with the exception of Jane Austen, whom I know intimately enough by now to call by her proper name. She also insisted that I set the formality aside. "If you continue to call me Ms. Austen I won't visit you anymore," she said. Other writers have also asked me to call them by their first name, but I tell them all that out of respect I feel more comfortable referring to them as "Mr. London, I loved *The Sea Wolf* and *The Call of the Wild*," or "Mr. Tolstoy, I thoroughly enjoyed every page of *Anna Karenina*," or "Ms. Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*, was a great book." But, getting back to Jane and her inability to write another novel, I carefully confer to her the following: "I can speak for the living when I say, Jane, that without a doubt you are an indispensable part of the past. Your novels are of such importance you have become a pillar of the present. Your literary input inspired the masses beyond measure. It was a tragedy nonetheless that you did not receive the recognition you deserved in your lifetime. But if it's any consolation there are a great many people today who believe you are the greatest novelist that ever lived."

"There is no glory in being a ghostwriter," she says.

"Granted, but you live on forever through the invaluable work you left behind and through the young aspiring writers of today. I for one would not be half the novelist that I am if it were not

for your ground-breaking books. You are my mentor, as are all of my ghostwriter friends. You and others like you are a challenge for us contemporary authors. We can only strive to live up to your greatness. Work such as yours will be remembered and read for all of eternity. The literary treasures that you alone left behind are an inspiration to us all and are as timeless as time itself," I tell her now, as I have told her many times before albeit the speech is never quite the same. But whenever she begins to brood about passing away in the prime of her life or about having her career cut short I am obliged to say the same thing each time. On this occasion, though, she has turned her face away from me and continues to stare forlornly towards the Random House Building. In a short while, I am pleased to report that she rises triumphantly from the depths of her despair. "You said you need a hero, well honey, who doesn't," she quips; flaunting only a fraction of her merciless wit she sheds her remorseful mood with a burst of laughter that so becomes her.

"No, for the new book I'm about to start," I quickly explain, since I am sure she is thinking that I am referring to some desire of my own.

"You're beginning a new book?" she asks.

"Yes. I also have to find a heroine. And no doubt it's going to be rather difficult finding them both in this world. Love is an intangible thing and almost impossible to find at the best of times, but when one is deliberately looking for love I'm sure it's even more elusive."

"You don't have to tell me," Jane says sardonically. "And don't deceive yourself it's difficult to find in any world."

"I've read that love usually comes when you least expect it. Sometimes when you don't even want it. Often with a person who doesn't love you in return."

"That, J.C., is called a tragedy," Jane says and then she rises slowly from the wooden chair she has been sitting on, the one that I use when working at my computer. She stretches her legs, laughs, and utters, in a derisive way, the word, "Love." Crossing the room she walks casually through the coffee table between us, as though the solid wood structure, and the stack of "The New Yorker" magazines, did not exist.

"I wish you wouldn't do that. It gives me the willies," I tell her, as she continues moving in my direction.

"What does?" she asks innocently enough, though we both know that she is not. Of all the ghosts I've met she can be the most guileful.

"Your ability to walk through inanimate objects bothers me."

"Why?" she asks with a wry smile.

"I am inclined to forget that you are a ghost until you go and do something supernatural."

Shrugging her slender shoulders, she laughs. "Most of the time I'm inclined to forget that I'm a ghost as well, until I try to do something earthly. I must go, and you must get on with your writing. Good luck with finding your hero and heroine," she tells me. Then once again she glides through the coffee table, "The New Yorker" magazines, my writing table, and my computer. She stops halfway through the window where she turns around to wish me luck one more time. I nonchalantly watch her leave through the window of my hotel room, which might I remind you dear readers (on occasions such as this I also have to remind myself) is on the twenty seventh floor. My eyes hold fast to her figure as it floats farther and farther away from the window. She fades gradually into oblivion or to where ever it is her and the rest of the ghosts go? Why whether they wander around aimlessly in this world, or whether they have some ghostly gathering place in another dimension I do not know at present. I do know that she will be back.

Chapter Three

Luck is not all I will need, I realize when leaving the lobby of the Waldorf=Astoria to begin a meticulous search of the city for a hero and a heroine. A comfortable pair of walking shoes would be more useful than all the well-wishing in the world, but instead I am wearing on my feet a fashionable pair of boots, which, no doubt, by the end of the day will have wrecked havoc upon my heels.

Strolling along Lexington Avenue I have no idea where to begin looking. In the multitude of Manhattan bars where, supposedly single, men and women meet might be the place to start, but right now it is morning and the nightclubs are closed. Without a clue as to where I am going I take the subway to Times Square. On the train I am hoping to witness the enraptured stare of two passengers. Strangers to each other they will make eye contact and the chemistry between them will cause them to gaze intently at each other with wanton desire. One will follow the other off the subway at Times Square station, where I will observe for myself the amorous lovers displaying their affection for each other. "This is a romance novel. Hand holding is all you're allowed in chapter one," I will tell them and then, as though my pen were a magic wand, I will whisk them off the subway platform where they are standing side by side and I will put them into my novel. When the subway does stop in Times Square, with a degree of indifference and a screeching sound, the doors open and I step off the train; all the while telling myself that I should have taken a taxi, as I would have done if I had not looking for a hero and a heroine. The crowded subway car that carried me to my destination, during rush hour, was not full of romantic fools I found to my dismay. Several people read the New York Times. Others kept their eyes riveted to the floor in fear. Some slept unaware of the hoodlums shuffling their feet, anxiously on the look out for anything of value that they could steal. Still others stared into the dark underground tunnel and beyond into their own unapproachable lives. The only thing the commuters had in common was a callous ability (myself included) to ignore the presence of the other passengers.

Upon leaving the subway system I am delighted to be above ground, but as I enter into the noisy confusion of Times Square I can't help wondering if I am attempting the impossible. Finding a pair of protagonists, in the throng of pedestrians that pass me by, is not going to be an easy task. On the look out for two people with the potential to become my protagonists it dawns on me that to be successful at this match making scheme of mine I will need much more than luck. Upon approaching a busy intersection I conclude I will need a miracle. It crosses my mind, standing on the corner of Broadway Avenue and Forty Second Street, that I could try advertising in any number of newspapers. Man and woman wanted to take part in romance novel. Must be willing to fall madly and passionately in love. Anyone less than perfect need not reply.

The romance novels that I read, like my agent, Mr. Morris, suggested had several things in common and I recall the absurdity of those things as I walk along Fifth Avenue. They all had happy endings. Something, more often than not, kept the hero and the heroine apart until the very end of the book, even though they were desperately in love with each other from page one or at the very least they were in lust since their eyes met in the first chapter. Usually one or both of them denied their attraction for the other, but finally after overcoming their inner conflicts, an

interfering third party, or a series of seemingly insurmountable circumstances, such as a forest fire, a flash flood, a hurricane, a friend that is actually a foe, or simply the forces of a fickle fate, in the last chapter they are united in holy matrimony and live happily ever after. "Hogwash," I hear someone say. Seeing no ghosts in the vicinity I can only assume that it was my writing muse making itself heard.

The Empire State Building is on my left, yet at the moment I am so immersed in my thoughts that I walk by it without noticing what was once the tallest free standing structure in the world. Coming upon the Port Authority Bus Terminal I find myself compelled to go inside, for it occurs to me that some young woman coming into the city for the first time, a virgin so to speak, could be searching for the man of her dreams? Perhaps, I can help her find him? The terminal is frighteningly filthy. There is feces on the floor in the men's room. Utterly disgusted by the uncleanness of my human counterparts I decide to leave and upon doing so I resign to resume my search at some other local. From the outside Penn Station seems like an appropriate place to look. Perhaps some damsel in distress is searching for the man of her dreams? Chaos, confusion, and the aftermath of a crime that was committed only moments ago by yet another gang of hoodlums are the only things I encounter inside. Granted there is a damsel in distress, but she is busy giving a description of her assailants to the security guards. Departing I carry with me, like two pieces of luggage, disappointment and despair. Returning through the Garment District I go directly into Macy's Department Store with an attitude of determination. Here they are having "the sale of the season," and I soon realize that everybody is too intent on shopping to see the soul mate they have been searching for all of their lives is standing right next to them. I find the nearest exit and go outdoors to do my shopping elsewhere. It was the opposite exit from the one I came in, so I circle around the block and before I know it I pass by the Empire State Building once again. This time I pay close attention to what used to be, according to one of the bellhops, the location of the Waldorf=Astoria. Not long after my survey of all 102 stories of the Empire State Building I decide to look in the Public Library. If nothing else it seems like a good place to rest my feet and I do just that. In the fiction section I find a copy of *The Sound and the Fury*; a book that was admittedly too difficult for me to finish reading the first time I tried. William Faulkner, the author of the book, was also the first ghost I ever met. I was staying in another hotel at the time where I was working night and day on my first novel. Exhausted from a full day of extensive revisions I went to bed early. Just prior to falling to sleep I was startled to feel someone in the room. The pervading presence of an entity in my room was unmistakable, as is always the case when any one of the ghostwriters come to visit. "Who's there?" I called bravely into the darkness surrounding me.

"One of your predecessors," replied William Faulkner. "Do not be afraid." At the time I was terrified. I had no idea that it was the ghostly spirit of William Faulkner. I was more inclined to believe it was some maniac from the street below that had broken into my room, and whose motive, no doubt, was to murder me in the most heinous manner imaginable. Also, in my panicked state, it seemed more probably to me at the time that he had said he was a "predator" as opposed to "predecessor." Quickly, my mind mulled over any means of escape.

"I've got a gun," I lied. "Get out, or I'll kill you."

"I'm already quite dead," he assured me. "I have been since 1962." Then the lights in the room came on. Aghast to see the ghost of William Faulkner, floating as he was around the room, I gasped. He was only just past the point of transparency and the "spook," which is what I considered him to be at the time, made me wish he were a serial killer of some sort in my room

instead. Back then I believed that anything would be better than the spectral figure whose feet were a foot above the floor. "What are you?" I demanded despairingly, sitting up in my bed and moving as far back against the wall as I possibly could.

"I'm William Faulkner," he replied. Then he floated across the room and hovered over my bed.

"I know who you are," I said, for a picture of his face was on the back jacket of one of his novels that was within my sight. It was on my night stand. As I Lay Dying, was the name of the novel and I had just finished reading it the day before. The book and his features were very fresh in my memory. "I want to know what you are?"

"I'm a ghost, of course."

"Of course," was my hoarse comeback, for I was too petrified to think of any other reply. The only experience I had with the supernatural up until then was watching "Casper the Friendly Ghost" cartoon on TV when I was a child, so I certainly could not call myself a parapsychologist. "Are you friendly?" I asked tentatively.

"Certainly," he said, "I'm from the South."

My eyes do not rest on *The Sound and the Fury* for long at any given time. Every so often I scan the room relentlessly looking for a hero and a heroine to call my own. In searching for two lovers that I can incorporate into my story I see that there are many people in the library today. Laymen looking for information. Students researching ever subject imaginable. Housewives foraging through the fiction section. There is a lovely looking librarian digging in her computer files for a book that is mysteriously missing from the shelves. Staring, as I presently am, over the top of *The Sound and the Fury*, I watch the menagerie of men and women intently for some telltale sign that says: "I am looking for love." I see nothing of the sort. I do, however, observe a horny pervert predisposed to follow every female he can find. Rubbing his crotch continuously he finally exposes his penis while peeking through the book shelves. He is hardly the hero I need for my novel, and I am abhorrent to think of whom his soul mate might be?

An hour later I am so frustrated I slam *The Sound and the Fury* down to the discretion of everyone in the room. Surely in all of Manhattan there must be a man and a woman whose romance I can write about? Another Romeo and Juliet just waiting to have their story told. Doesn't anybody want to fall in love anymore? Tragically, I realize there aren't as many sentimental men and women running around the city like I assumed there would be after reading those romance novels. I come to the conclusion that romance writers must have very vivid imaginations to create characters who are the absolute essence of chivalry.

Upon leaving the library I return to Times Square, where I am obliged to witness something truly tragic - a vast number of homeless and hungry looking people. Finding food and a safe bed for the night, not the luxury of falling in love, must be foremost on the minds of the many unfortunate souls I see sprawled out on the sidewalk begging for spare change. I am ready to give up hope of ever finding a hero and a heroine when I spot a beautiful young lady sitting on a bench waiting for the Broadway Avenue bus. She is reading a romance novel, but it is neither her beauty nor the book that makes me feel certain of having found my heroine. The reason behind my optimism is the dollar bill she gives in a gracious manner to one of the homeless people. It is this act of chivalry that convinces me she is the one. It's a miracle, I think to myself, and as I approach her my heart begins to beat faster. My apprehension is heightened by the fact that she appears to be absolutely perfect in every aspect of her person. A heroine to enhance all heroines. I am close enough now to see the color of her eyes. I am close enough now to see that she is no

more than twenty five years of age. I am close enough to see that she is wearing a wedding ring and I am more crestfallen than you can imagine. The gold wedding band around the third finger of her left hand hits me, in part, because of it's ruinous ramifications, and also because the midday sun directly above us reflects off the ring at an angle that causes a laser-like beam of light to burst my optimistic bubble. It could not have hit me any harder if it had been deliberately hellbent on doing so. Regrettably for me her romance has already been written by someone else. Perhaps, she wrote it herself? I am about to back away from the woman in question when it becomes obvious that she saw me approaching with some purpose in mind. I am obliged to smile and act like a fool, for fear that otherwise she would perceive me to be in need of some spare change or worse a weirdo in want of something other than money. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else," I say, smiling apologetically.

"So much for miracles," I mumble to myself, as I stroll down the street in a new direction.

I turn left when I reach Avenue of the Americas and I walk along this famous thoroughfare until I come to Radio City Music Hall. I keep on going. I do not know enough about the life of a dancer to write a believable romance about one of the Rockettes. Presently, my prospects of finding a pair of protagonists begin to appear more and more minuscule by the moment. I walk a bevy of blocks over to Carnegie Hall. It is late in the afternoon by now. I make up my mind to move on, for I know next to nothing about classical music. I could not possibly write a credible account about the romance of a classical musician when the span of my musical experience starts and stops with hard rock. In a round about way I retrace my steps and return to Madison Avenue. I stop in front of the Museum of Modern Art, where good fortune favors me by giving me a glimpse at the most amazing looking man. He has a face with finely chiseled features that is handsome enough to have come from the pages of any romance novel. Good fortune favors me again for he also stops directly in front of the museum. His mannerisms make it apparent that he is waiting for someone, which will be an equally attractive woman if I have my way. I wait impatiently for whomever it is that he is waiting patiently for to arrive. When he looks down at his watch I take the opportunity to study him from top to bottom. He too appears perfect in every aspect of his person. When he reads the museum pamphlet he is holding I am allowed an even longer look and I am delighted to say that he is not wearing a wedding ring. He smiles suddenly and I see recognition in his eyes. Where is the beautiful young woman I wonder? In less time than it takes for me to realize he is not my "Mr. Right" another man turns off the sidewalk and comes up to where we are standing. As the two men embrace I am still hopeful, but when my prospective hero kisses the man on the mouth for a full minute I am crestfallen once again. As they turn towards the museum holding hands I turn despondently in the opposite direction of yet another disappointment. From here all the way back to the Waldorf=Astoria I have no hope whatsoever of finding a hero or a heroine today. On hold will be the Upper West Side, the Upper East Side, the Lower East Side, Little Italy, Chinatown, Battery Park, the Financial District, the Bowery, Lincoln Center, Greenwich Village, Soho, Central Park, and Harlem if need be. Not to mention the boroughs of Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island, and New Jersey if absolutely necessary, but that is as far as I will take my search. Yet, all of these places will have to wait, for I am exhausted and as painful prove of my plight to find a pair of protagonists that are the epitome of perfection I have huge blisters on both of my heels. Having just spent the entire day roaming around Midtown Manhattan to no avail I am fated to feel no further ahead. I have not even come close to discovering two characters like those described in the romance novels that I read. But, do not be discouraged, dear reader, by my failure in finding for your

reading pleasure a pair of protagonists, for as I limp along Lexington Avenue towards the hotel I am unaware of what lies in wait.

Wearily I walk through the lobby of the Waldorf=Astoria. The elevator takes me up to the twenty seventh floor. Inside my room I remove my boots with a sigh of relief and I survey my luxurious surroundings with a great deal of gratitude. Seeing my computer, however, I am filled with a feeling of despair, for little do I know that my hero, more handsome than the man at the Museum of Modern Art, and my heroine, more beautiful by far than the woman at the Broadway Avenue bus stop, are both waiting, willing, and ready to begin their romance.

Chapter Four

The morning after my romantic quest across the city I open my eyes to find Ms. Austen sitting on the foot of my bed. There is a gratuitous smile on her face. "Good morning, Jane," I greet my guest groggily.

"Good morning, J.C. I thought you'd be up before dawn to begin work on your new book?"

"I would be, but I haven't found my hero or my heroine yet."

"All the more reason for you to get your lazy flesh and blood body out of bed and get to work," she replies, and as disgruntled as I am by her remark I realize it is good advice for any writer. Yet, I make no attempt to get out of bed. Instead my reaction is quite the opposite I pull the covers up as far as my chin and close my eyes.

"Why are you here so early?" I ask, with my eyes still shut.

"It's not early. It's almost noon hour," she tells me. Finding it hard to believe that I slept so late I resign to open my eyes and turn them towards the clock on my night stand, which confirms Jane was telling the truth about the time of day and that I am the epitome of laziness.

"I was up late last night," I inform her, and she casts her eyes cruelly upon me to convey her contempt.

"The writer can not be slovenly," she warns. "I was up all evening," she adds.

"Then you must be tired too," I say and then I remember who I am talking to, so I add, "Or don't ghosts sleep?"

"Of course we sleep."

"Some more peacefully than others, I presume."

"We do just about everything the living do," she states.

"Do you have sex?"

"Not recently," she replies.

"Do you go to the bathroom?"

She is too much of a lady to talk about any bowel or bladder movements she may or may not have, so instead she tells me what kept her up all night. "I spent the entire evening at a gay bar in Greenwich Village. I danced all night long."

"Sounds like great fun, but you still haven't told me what you're doing here?"

"I came to help you find your hero and your heroine."

As irresistible as her offer sounds it is a struggle for me to sit up, so deep is my disorientation, and so strong my desire for more sleep. I do, however, make the effort to ask her, "How?"

"Well first of all you have to get out of bed."

In a moments time I do just that, for it would seem that my eagerness to begin the book is stronger than my desire to stay in bed. "Good," she tells me the moment my feet hit the floor. "Now wipe that gloomy expression off your face. Good. Now get dressed." I put on my bathrobe. "It will do. Now go to your computer and..."

"Hold on. I can't start writing until I have a cup of coffee."

"They're on their way up with it right now," Jane informs me.

"They can't be. Last night I told room service not to disturb me this morning."

"I stopped in the kitchen on my way here for a bite to eat. I took the liberty of reinstating your regular order."

Almost immediately there is a familiar knock on my door. I tighten the belt on my bathrobe, unbolt the door, and let in the bellhop. By now it is customary for him to bring me coffee and croissants every morning, and as usual, whenever she is present, Jane proceeds in having "some fun" with the bellhop by going 'Boo...' Today is no different, though her delivery is more emphatic than usual.

"Did you say something?" asks the bellhop, and like the last time this happened he looks around the room, but of course he does not see Jane sitting on the foot of the bed. As I stated earlier in this book even when the ghosts are at their most visible stage they are invisible unless they wish themselves to be seen. I am the only person, as far as I know, who has ever been able to see the ghosts when they are in my company.

"I didn't say anything," I reply honestly and shaking my head innocently I bite down on my tongue to keep myself from laughing for what would appear to the bellhop to be "for no apparent reason."

The joke is not over for Jane. She rises from the edge of the bed, crosses the room, picks up the coffee pot, and pours some of the steaming brew into a cup. She is lifting the cup full of coffee up to her mouth when the bellhop, who was opening the drapes, turns around. I grab hold of the cup before the bellhop's field of vision encompasses what he would conclusively call "a cup floating in mid air." Having spilled a portion of the hot liquid onto my hand I am on the verge of hollering. I manage to remain silent, however much it hurts, for the sake of my sane reputation. The bellhop looks my way just as I have secured the cup. Smiling nonchalantly I pretend to take a sip. Seeing Jane pick up one of the croissants I quickly snatch it away from her invisible fingers, before it appears to have risen by it's own volition as well. I take a bite while the bellhop continues to watch with eyes that are wider than what I'm sure his employer would want. What he must think I do not know? That I am extremely hungry and thirsty this morning? Myself I am inclined to think that Jane is extremely relentless and high-spirited this morning, for she rushes to the open door and closes it with a slam. I set my coffee cup down directly and drop the croissant on top of the serving tray. Hereafter, I observe that the startled bellhop is now in a hurry to get out of the room. He moves hastily towards the door, but in doing so he walks directly through Jane. He stops with his hand on the doorknob where he shivers involuntarily, as though a cold chill had passed through his entire body. "Have a... a good day," he says uncertainly on his way out of the room.

Turning on my guest, I shout, "Jane," but then I realize that in all likelihood the bellhop is still in the hallway, and not wanting him to spread it around that I am inclined to talk to myself, I

lower my voice considerably. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

"What?" she asks like the most innocent of all the dearly departed ghostwriters I know, which of course she is not. She is the most willful ghost I know.

"Haunt people in my presence."

"Huh, I do no such thing. I have never haunted anyone. Only poltergeists haunt people and I am not a poltergeist."

"Well, whatever you are, you are as incorrigible as Tennessee Williams was when he was here last week." I pour us both a cup of coffee.

"Was he really? You never mentioned it?"

"I forgot. Anyway, we were in the middle of discussing his play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, when Truman Capote came conspicuously into the room. We had just started to talk about one of Mr. Capote's books, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, I believe, when my agent arrived unexpectedly. He overheard me talking to myself, or so he thought."

"Mr. Morris?" Jane asks.

"In person," I reply.

"What happened?"

"First of all I told him I was writing and that I was reading some scenes out loud, but by the dubious expression on his face I don't think he believed me."

"You should have told him you were talking on the phone," Jane says.

"I never thought of that until later. I was too busy trying to keep Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote from turning the hotel room upside down. Between the two of them they kept me moving from one end of the room to the other and of course I had to appear casual for the benefit of Mr. Morris."

"That must have been difficult to do?" Jane says.

"It was, especially since they pulled one prank after another. They took turns switching the lights on and off. I told Mr. Morris the wiring was faulty and the hotel was sending an electrician up to fix it. Mr. Capote and Mr. Williams would not leave well enough alone. No matter what I did I could not get them to settle down. I gave them both a menacing look when Mr. Morris had his head turned. Truman Capote stuck out his tongue, while Tennessee Williams responded with his index finger. There seemed to be no end to their imaginative behavior. Lifting objects up in the air. Turning the volume up and down on the tv and changing the channels. Making sounds just audible enough for my agent to hear. And things got considerably worse when Oscar Wilde walked through the wall. My jaw dropped and out loud I said, 'Wow! Oscar Wilde,' for I had never met him until that day and my agent said, 'What about him?' so I said, 'Oh, ah, um, I was just commenting on Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I read it recently and...'

'Where's Walt?' Mr. Wilde asked, looking all around the room. Mr. Williams and Mr. Capote both said something about him being on his way, for apparently the four ghosts had arranged to meet in my hotel room. Sure enough the next thing I know Walt Whitman shows up with his white beard and his hat cocked at a rakish angle. 'Walt Whitman!' I exclaimed, and again my agent, watching me as I stared in awe at what he perceived to be nothing more than a bare wall, asked, 'What about him?'

'Ah, I was just wondering if you've ever read Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*?'

'I don't read much poetry,' Mr. Morris said, all the while looking around the room suspiciously. Suffice to say, I spent the next half an hour trying to keep those four mischievous ghosts and their goings-on from the attention of Mr. Morris. It was an energetic gesture on my

part, for they were completely out of control. As bad as their behavior was, however, they were a good-natured gaggle of ghosts. But, by the time my agent left I was sure that some of their stunts and unearthly antics, had he seen them, would have sent the middle-aged man into an early grave or at the very least he would have thought he was losing his mind. As it was he thought that I had lost my mind. On his way out the door he said, 'I've always known you were neurotic, J.C., but I've never seen you quite so anxious before. Is everything all right?'

'I'm just a little jumpy,' I replied, as I reached behind my back to hold down the lamp that Truman Capote was trying to raise.

'To say the least,' he said, and it's no wonder he said so since the entire time he was there I jumped up and down and ran around the room trying to retrieve objects from mid air. I coughed incessantly to cover up the groans and the moans and the endless boos."

Jane, who has been laughing throughout most of my story finishes her coffee and then stands up to leave. "I have to go home," she informs me graciously. Gathering the long skirt she is wearing with one hand she holds it expertly out of her way when she glides across the room. I should mention, now that the subject of her attire has been brought to your attention, that she dresses much the same way that she did in the 1800's when she was alive. All the ghosts dress identical to the way they did in their day.

"I wasn't aware you had a home?" I ask her.

"Well my home will always be in England with my family, but while I'm in the United States I usually stay, and yes sleep, at the Library of Congress."

"The one in Washington, D.C.?"

"There's only one," she tells me unnecessarily.

"But that's so far?"

"Not when you're a ghost. I'll be there in less than five minutes," she says.

"But why the Library of Congress?"

"I like to be surrounded by books."

"Why not the Public Library right here in New York?" I inquire.

"The books in the library have all been published."

"So?" I say, for at present I do not see her point.

"At the Library of Congress every book that has ever been copyrighted in the United States is there. Do you have any idea, J.C., how many good books they have in their files that have never been published?"

"Knowing the industry as well as I do I can easily imagine."

"As a matter of fact that's where I read your first novel before it was published."

"You never told me that before," I say, and for a variety of reasons I refrain from asking her for her professional opinion.

"Well, I must be off."

"Hey, you said you could help me find a hero and a heroine?" The forsaken sound of my voice is mostly meant to keep Jane's visit from ending, for as always I am a little reluctant to let her leave, but she assumes my sole reason for sounding so forsaken is her unfulfilled promise of helping me find a hero and a heroine.

"I already have," she says indignantly and I don't know anyone, dead or alive, who can express indignation better than Jane Austen.

"You have?" I reply, raising both of my eyebrows in a bewildered way.

"I got you out of bed, didn't I?" Now, sit down in front of your computer and get to work.

Your hero and your heroine will come to you," she tells me and I am inclined to believe she was right, for not long after she left I was fortunate enough to have found them both.

Chapter Five

"You, sir, are going to be the handsome hero in my new novel."

"I am?"

"Yes, but first you must shave off your mustache."

"Why?"

"You have to be clean shaven."

"How come?"

"It's the required formula for a romance novel. Heroes can't have hairy faces."

"That's absurd," he says. "I don't make the rules. I only write by them."

"What's in it for me?" my hero is apparently self-serving enough to ask.

"To begin with there will be a pretty, no a beautiful young lady. And not only will she be a virgin, she will be the kind of woman that you had pubescent dreams about going to bed with when you were a boy. You'll get to make love to your dream girl three times in every chapter. She will love you with all her heart and soul. She will be a wonderful lover. A gourmet cook. More giving than any of your girlfriends have ever been. She will be a faithful friend. A good mother to all the children she will readily bear for you. You will both live long and prosperous lives. With her by your side you will never be lonely again. You and your beautiful bride to be will live happily ever after. What do you say? Are you interested?"

"Is this a sick joke? Are you some kind of crack-pot?"

"No, I'm serious."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Now get lost."

"I'm a serious novelist. You've probably heard of me. My name's J.C. Clover-Cook."

"Never."

"Well maybe you don't read very much?"

"I read a lot."

"Well maybe you don't read fiction?"

"Wrong. I read all kinds of fiction."

"Well maybe you don't read good literary fiction?"

"You're grasping. I just read James Joyce's Ulysses. Does that answer your question?"

"I guess you've just never heard of me?"

"I haven't, so fuck off and leave me alone."

"I think you'll be perfect. A hero who's read Ulysses. What more could I ask for. Even I haven't read Ulysses yet. Wow, what luck. Wait until I tell Jane."

"Who?" my hero asks.

I stop typing when I realize a revision is necessary. I can not have the hero spurting obscenities at will, but for some strange reason I could not stop him, and I hereby warn any reader who has an aversion to foul language that I may not be able to stop him in the future either. I will do my best, however, to keep his obscenities at bay.

Looking out the hotel room window at the Random House Building across the way I think of Jane, so when I sense a presence behind me I assume it is her. Obligated, however, to smell

cigarette smoke permeating my room, I turn around and see James Joyce sitting in an armchair. "Mr. Joyce, what a surprise."

"You're J.C. Clover-Cook, I presume?"

"Yes, sir, I am. What a pleasure it is to meet you."

"Likewise, I've heard a great deal about you from several ghostwriter friends of mine," he informs me and I must confess that I am duly flattered.

"I'm honored, Mr. Joyce."

"Call me James."

"I will if you want, Mr. Joyce, but I feel more comfortable calling someone of your stature by their surname."

"Suit yourself," he says, as he draws on his cigarette in a contemplative manner, while simultaneously wiping his small round eye glasses with a handkerchief. Upon returning the spectacles to the bridge of his nose, and after adjusting them into their proper position, he walks across the room to get an ashtray, which I would have gotten for him if I had not been so goggle-eyed by his presence. I make amends for my poor manners by asking my guest if I can get him anything else. He shakes his head, tells me that he is content for the time being, and after an examination of his surroundings he sits back down in the armchair. "Don't let me interrupt you," he says. "I was in the neighborhood and I heard you mention my name. Go on with your writing. I'll just watch for a while if it's all right with you?"

"All right? It will be an honor to have you in the room while I write. Just let me finish this chapter and I'm yours for the rest of the day. And by the way, Mr. Joyce, I did read *Finnegans Wake* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I just haven't gotten to *Ulysses* yet, though I'm looking forward to reading it. I hear it is the quintessential novelist's novel."

Turning to face my computer I take the time to look out the window once again. My eyes do not remain fixed on the Random House Building for long, in lieu of the fact that James Joyce is sitting in the same room waiting for me to begin. Then to my astonishment, after getting up once again from the armchair, he decides to stand directly behind me. I shudder to think that such a distinguished novelist is observing me at work on a novel. Even though his presence is an inspiration it is unnerving, nonetheless, to have a literary genius looking over my shoulder watching me write and reading what I write before it is revised. As awkward as the eminently talented man makes me feel I have never been insecure about my own talent, so it is just a matter of time before the ghost of James Joyce in back of me is forgotten and I find myself concentrating fully on the following composition.

"My hero has to be strong," I say, "so you are going to lift weights in your spare time."

"Before I begin working out for some woman I want to know what she looks like. She's not some dog who can't get a date?"

I ignore his derogatory remark and inform him of the following: "I haven't found her yet, but I can assure you she will be so ravishingly beautiful that all my heterosexual male readers will be aroused, all my female readers will be envious, and every lesbian the world over will be compelled to fall in love with her as well."

"Just make sure she's got big tits," he tells me and to be truthful I am taken aback. "The bigger the better. I'm a boob man," he explains.

"I'll do my best. Meanwhile go shave off your mustache, buy yourself some barbells, and begin working out once a day." He runs his hand across the hair on his upper lip affectionately, as though he is reluctant to part with what he later tells me is his "pride and joy."

"I hope there is nothing the matter with your mouth?"

"What do you mean?" he asks defensively.

"It's not misshapen? You not hiding a hair lip beneath that blond apparel?"

"Hardly, I'm handsome from head to toe," he tells me.

"And modest?" I inquire.

"As modest as any man with my many attributes can be."

"Good, because I'd have to get rid of you if you weren't."

"Why?" he wants to know.

"I can not have a hero whose features are less than perfect or one who is hung up on himself. You have to be flawless on the inside as well as on the outside, otherwise I will be forced to find someone else. I presume you have no deep dysfunctional character traits that I should be aware of?"

"Certainly not," my hero replies self-righteously.

"Well if you do, they must not be revealed to the reader. Keep any prejudices, biased opinions, or personality quirks out of my book, and that includes your fondness for foul language. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Good, and remember those two words, for you'll be saying them on your wedding day."

"I will."

"Those are appropriate as well. Now, what do you do for a living?"

"I work in a bank."

"Honorable enough, I suppose. Schooling?"

"I graduated summa cum laude from Harvard University."

"You graduated from Harvard and you're a bank teller?"

"I'm vice-president."

"No, no, you can't be vice-president. My hero can't be more than twenty five years old."

"I'm twenty four and I can assure you that I am the vice-president. And if you don't believe me that's your fucking problem."

"Would you settle for being the bank manager?"

"I'm the fucking vice-president."

"Fine. You're the vice-president. Far be it for me, the author, to have any say in the matter. So what if my readers find it unbelievable that someone could become vice-president of a bank by the age of twenty four."

"Whether you, or your alleged readers, believe me or not it's the truth."

"We'll discuss it later. There's just one more very important thing that I need to ask you."

"What's that?"

"Your name? We need to know your name?"

"Michael Burrows."

"Burrows? Are you by any chance related to the Burrows of Manhattan?" I ask.

"I'm their son. Their only son. I'm the sole beneficiary to a billion dollars."

"Bingo!" I exclaim to myself joyfully, for I have somehow auspiciously hit the jackpot in the lottery of love. Not only is my hero handsome, and well read, he is extremely wealthy, and he is the vice-president to one of Manhattan's largest banks. My heroine, whomever she might be, is going to be the happiest woman in the world. "I will get back to you, Mr. Burrows."

Chapter Six

"Oh, hello, Ms. Woolf. How are you this morning?"

"I'm fine, thank you, J.C. I hope I haven't come at a bad time. I heard you working at your computer, but I decided I would drop in anyway. If I'm interrupting your work just tell me. Are you writing another novel?"

"I've just begun. Have a seat and don't worry about the interruption. Once I begin I would never take a break if it wasn't for you ghostwriters visiting me and I always look forward to seeing each and every one of you. Do you want some coffee? It's fresh. The bellhop just brought it up a few minutes ago."

"I'd love a cup," Ms. Woolf says, so I proceed to pour for her from the steaming pot. I allow her to take whatever confectioneries she desires in the way of cream and sugar herself from the tray. And while stirring the two spoonfuls of sugar in my coffee, I say, "Before I forget, Ms. Woolf, I must tell you James Joyce was here yesterday and I learned the most fascinating fact, which I made an oath to myself to remember to tell you the next time we met. I had no idea, however, that it would be today or else I would not have worried so much about my fallible memory."

"I was in the neighborhood," Ms. Woolf replies.

"That's funny, Ms. Woolf, James Joyce said the same thing."

"Well the neighborhood for New York City, as I'm sure you know by now, is anywhere in the western hemisphere when you're a ghost."

"I know, Thomas Hardy told me all about the length of time it takes for a ghost to travel."

"I really was in the neighborhood. I was walking on the East River."

"Don't you mean along?"

"Not at all. So what was it you learned from James that's so fascinating?" Ms. Woolf asks.

"There now I did forget," I say, and taking a moment to clear my mind I will myself to remember. "Oh yes, did you know that you and he were both born in the year 1882?"

"I believe so," she says.

"But, did you know that you both died in 1941? Isn't that an amazing coincidence? Two writers so similar in the stream-of-consciousness style."

"We both used the technique in our books, but didn't he die a few months before me?" Ms. Woolf asks.

"Indeed, Mr. Joyce died on January 13 and you died on March 28. You committed suicide like Mr. Smith did in your novel Mrs. Dalloway."

"In a different manner," she replies.

"Mr. Joyce told me that you drowned in a tidal river near your home in Sussex, England. Purportedly you put a large stone in your pocket." She is not upset by my statement. I knew she wouldn't be before I said it. From what I gather the ghostwriters are wholly aware of having died, and Virginia Woolf has had more than fifty years to accept her death and the consequences (if any) of having killed herself.

"You have written about suicide as well," she says. "In your last book I believe. Does that mean...? she begins to ask, stopping in mid sentence for fear of upsetting me, but I am not at all

jolted by her juxtaposition.

"It crosses my mind occasionally," I confess, for it is no secret amongst my circle of ghostwriting friends that my destructive disposition is destined to take an occasional inward turn towards my self. "I guess sometimes self-destructive behavior goes with the territory of being highly creative. Ernest Hemingway... Oh, never mind I don't want to talk about him, though he's supposed to be coming back from Africa sometime next week. It's been quite a while since I've seen him, so I can expect a visit."

Having finished her coffee, Ms. Woolf, vacates the chair where she has been sitting. The same armchair that James Joyce sat in the day before. "I should go and let you get some work done. I'll see you soon," she says, and she is about to go through one of the walls when she stops and adds, "Don't wish to be a ghost too much, J.C., it's not as grand as it may seem to someone on the outside. The glory of being a ghostwriter is not that great."

"What a coincidence that you should say that, Ms. Woolf, because Jane Austen told me the very same thing. Only she said, 'There is no glory in being a ghostwriter.'"

"Jane Austen was right," Ms. Woolf replies, and then she is gone.

Alone in my room I waste no precious time returning to work, but once I'm settled in front of my computer I give into gazing for a short while at the Random House Building. Like Jane I also have dreams about the publishing house. Having them scoop up my obscure novels and market them into best selling books is a fantasy that I seldom indulge in for any length of time. Today is no different, for like a stern disciplinarian I turn my thoughts towards the task at hand, and in doing so I eradicate from my mind the daydream I have been having about receiving rewards for my writing, which may or may not be forthcoming. Yesterday morning I was fortunate enough to have found my hero, but I spent all afternoon and part of the evening with Mr. Joyce, so I still haven't found my heroine. In less time than it has taken for me to tell you this, however, I have her in my field of vision, and oh what a vision she is.

She is stunning to look at from every conceivable angle. There is a seductive smile frozen on her oval shaped mouth, which is made to look even more inviting with fire red lipstick. For some reason though she is wearing what even a circus clown would say is too much rouge. The lids that conceal her emerald green eyes are covered with what even a drag queen might say is too much eye-shadow. All in all perhaps even a painted turtle, if it could talk, would tell us that she is wearing too much make-up for midafternoon. Furthermore, a small amount of mascara is smeared at the corner of each eye, but she does not know it. She quickly forgot about the tears she shed for her situation in life less than an hour ago. Beneath the excessive amount of make-up, and however haphazardly applied, the classic beauty of her face is evident. Her nose is prominent, but in perfect proportion with the rest of her facial features. She has long black curly hair that rests in a riveting fashion around what I've already stated is an exquisite face. Her legs are long and are as alluring as the rest of her fabulous figure. She is standing resolutely on a street corner pacing back and forth continuously, yet always within the perimeter of only a few feet in either direction. Her habit of staying put is how I am able to study her so closely and for such a long time. I notice now that there is a restlessness about her behavior that leads me to believe she is waiting for someone. And though there remains at present some distance between myself and my prospective heroine I am able to discern a hard slightly indefinable cold stare in her green eyes. She appears to be watching the traffic that drives by her with an unlimited degree of indifference. It is a muggy day in New York. The humidity is high, so a neophyte to the city might assume at first glance that the skimpy outfit she is wearing is her weapon against the warm

weather. "It is not," my writing muse tells me. "She wears similar outfits in the winter as well," my muse says, so even though I would like to tell you readers otherwise it is incumbent that I tell you the truth, since sooner or later you will find out for yourselves all about "her situation in life." Having watched her standing in the same spot for several hours now, and having done little more than describe her physical features, as luscious as they might be, the time has come for me to give you readers the details you both deserve and demand as an appreciative audience. First I would like to free myself from any burden of blame by saying that my writing muse made me do it. Next I wish to entirely extricate myself from the possible wrath of my readership by saying that although I have been watching her all afternoon, and although I am no neophyte to New York City, I have been naive enough to think that she has been, and still is, waiting for a friend. "Excuse me."

"Hey," she hollers at me with what I believe is a Brooklyn accent.

"Hi," I say in return, "how are you doing?"

"I'm doing OK?"

"Nice night."

"Nice enough," she replies coldly. "What can I do for you?" she inquires with a coquet manner, though there is still an incredible amount of coldness in her gazing green eyes.

"Well my name is J.C. Clover-Cook, and..."

"I've heard of you."

"Oh really. I'm a writer. Have you read one of my novels?"

"Yes, I have and I hated it. It was the most apprehensible piece of prose that I have ever had the displeasure of coming across. Where do you get off comparing people to parasites?"

Taken aback I manage to say, "I was trying to make a point about the perils of pollution..."

"Piss off," she replies.

"Well, ah, um, I'm writing another novel, but I'm trying to leave out the apprehensible parts, and I was wondering if you'd be interested in becoming the bitchy, I mean, the beautiful heroine?"

"I don't understand?"

"I want you to be the heroine in my new novel. It will be a wonderful part and you seem to be exactly what I'm looking for. You're bright, articulate, lovely to look at, and if I may say so you look like you could use a little bit of love in your life."

"What do I have to do? I'm not into anything kinky."

"Kinky? Not at all. It's a love story. A romance novel."

"Not one of those gothic romances? I don't want any trouble," she says, and dropping the cold act, that her chosen profession deems necessary for her to often purvey, a soft vulnerability pervades her eyes when she asks, "Will anything bad happen to me? I've had enough heartache to last me a thousand lifetimes," she informs me fatalistically.

"Whatever happens to you, you can be sure you will come out of it unscathed and on top. You will be triumphant in the end, get the man of your dreams, and live happily ever after."

"I've heard other girls tell stories about how they believed their hero had come along on a white horse to whisk them away and rescue them from this," she gestures with her arm at the street around her, "but they always wound up heartbroken and disappointed and back on the street before they knew what hit them. I have never believed in fairy tales or in happily-ever-after endings. Take my word for it, J.C. Clover-Cook, nothing good ever happens out here."

"This time it has," I say as convincingly as I can.

"Is that so?" Well I don't come cheap," she purrs in a playful, yet altogether trenchant manner.

"I wouldn't want it any other way," I tell her and my tone of voice undoubtedly must have unmasked my complete confusion about her comment, for I thought she meant she had high standards when she said, "I don't come cheap." Yet, at the moment she is rambling on about her "flare" for faking an elaborate orgasm.

"And they don't call me the loudest lay on the Lower East Side for nothing," she concludes.

"The loudest what?" I say shaking my head in confusion. "Never mind. I need to know if you're interested in becoming the heroine? I have the hero all picked out for you and if I do say so myself he is absolutely perfect."

"Hmm, a husband would be nice, and I've always wanted to have a child. When I was a young girl growing up in Brooklyn I used to dream about getting married, moving far away, and raising a family, but now..."

"I could give you a baby, but of course only after you're married. Sure, I can write a baby into the book. I'll work it into the plot somehow? Do you want a boy or a girl?"

"A boy would be nice."

"Consider him conceived," I laugh at my pun, but it passes her by. "You know like conceiving a child and conceiving an idea," I exclaim.

"I got it the first time," she tells me in a street wise way. "What does he look like?"

"Who?" I ask.

"My husband, the hero of the book?"

"He's tall, blue-eyed, blond, and better looking than your average movie star. His name's Michael Burrows. He's incredibly rich and extremely intelligent. The only negative thing about him is his penchant for using swearwords."

"Fuck, that don't matter. You just make sure he's well endowed in the dick department. I like my men big."

"I will, but you're supposed to be a virgin?"

After laughing almost to the point of hysteria, she looks at me in a perplexed way, like perhaps I am from another planet. "A virgin!"

"Of course. In all the romance novels that I read the women were all virgins or at the very least virgin-like. Aren't you?"

"Wake up and smell my snatch, honey," she hollers. "I'm a hooker, and you are standing in a place called hell. Oh, and look here comes the devil himself."

I am speechless and too distraught to notice that her pimp is approaching. Not only is my heroine not wholesome and pure, untainted and untouched, like my publisher and the public would have preferred her to be, she stinks?

"Relax, and don't look so worried," she says with a wry yet ravishing smile. "I was joking. I'm very clean and safe, but I ain't no virgin."

"That's ok. You can lie, can't you?"

"Sure, but if you want me to be a virgin it's gonna cost you an extra fifty bucks!"

I stop typing and I am about to tear up this chapter to start anew with a different heroine when some inexplicable force prevents me from doing the deed. It must be my writing muse making itself heard, for I am hereby coerced once again into allowing my creativity to take it's natural course. I am compelled to write about this unconventional woman, even though my agents advice: "keep controversy out of the book" comes to mind. To find out more about my chosen heroine I begin by going back to the Lower East Side. On my way I realize my oversight of not

having asked her her name. Sure enough she is still standing on the street corner when I arrive. My heroine may not be a virgin, but she is definitely diligent. "I forgot to ask you your name?"

"It's Barbra, with only two a's."

"Like the singer?" I ask with a certain amount of uncertainty, for if I allow my heroine to be called "Barbra" can the singer sue me?

"That's right," she replies. "We're both Jewish and we were both born in Brooklyn as well. My mother is a fan and when she was eight months pregnant with me she became fixated with the superstar after seeing her sing in Central Park, or so the story goes."

Foreseeing no lawsuit on the horizon I am about to tell Barbra that a name change will not be necessary when a long black Lincoln Town car, that has circled the block several times since my return, pulls up to the curb. The driver, an elderly man, presses the button that opens and closes the window on the passenger's side of the car. With his finger firmly rooted on the button the window rolls down and Barbra recognizes the man inside the rented car as a regular "John," so she opens the door and jumps inside the fearsome looking vehicle.

"Wait, what's your last name?" I ask, just as they begin to drive away.

Leaning out the window, she shouts, "Lovenstein." Then the long black Lincoln, having moved much farther down the street by now, turns left at the corner. Hereat, my heroine vanishes from my field of vision.

Chapter Seven

Not long after finding the pair of protagonists I need for my romance novel I realize that I must speak with them both one more time before arranging for them to meet. Searching systematically through the Manhattan telephone book for my hero, Michael Burrows, I see there are several M. Burrows listed in the directory. I am ready to call them all when I notice there is only one living on Park Avenue. Certain that he is the Michael I'm looking for I dial the number. The person who promptly picks up the phone is extremely formal. It is the unmistakable and distinguished voice of a butler that answers, "The Burrows' residence."

"May I speak with Michael Burrows?"

"Whom may I ask is calling?"

"J.C. Clover-Cook."

"The author?"

"Yes," I reply enthusiastically, for my name is rarely ever recognized. "You've read one of my books?"

"I dare say, I have."

"And did you like it?"

"I will summon Mr. Burrows," says the voice on the other end.

"Snob," I say to the empty receiver.

"Sophisticate, would be a more apt description," complains the vexed voice of the butler who was still on the phone.

"I've got it, Ludwig," Michael says, for I am able to hear him hollering with authority to the

butler. He did so just as he was lifting up an extension.

"Ludwig?" I say out loud with a laugh.

"What can I do for you, J.C.?" Michael asks, choosing to ignore my mocking of the butler's name.

"It's not what you can do for me it's what I have done for you. I've found the girl of your dreams."

"Wonderful. What's her name?"

"Barbra Lovenstein, and she's breathtakingly beautiful."

"Does she have big knockers?"

"I'm not exactly sure. She was showing a lot of cleavage."

"You didn't get her bust measurement?"

"No, but that's why I'm calling you. I need to know precisely how big your penis is?"

"What on earth for?"

"Barbra likes her men well endowed."

"Tell her it's big enough to make her wail like a wild banshee woman."

"That's marvelous, but I think she'd prefer it if I tell her the exact length."

"Ten and a half inches. Now it's her turn to tell. Call me back when you get her measurements." Click.

There is only one Barbra Lovenstein in the phone book. There is, in fact, only one Lovenstein in the phone book, but there is no answer. I try again in twenty minutes at which time, I am pleased to report, Barbra herself answers the phone on the fifth ring. It does not give me a great deal of pleasure, however, to have to tell you readers that she was not thrilled at the interruption. "I was doing a two hundred dollar trick. What the hell do you want?"

"I just talked to Michael."

"Who?"

"Michael Burrows. The man of your dreams. The man you are going to marry. The father of your child. Anyway, he wants to know your measurements?"

"Don't they all," she sternly says.

"He told me that he's ten and a half inches."

"Oh really, well we'll knock off at least an inch and a half on account of his male ego, which leaves us with a lousy nine inches."

"Won't that do?" I inquire.

"I've had bigger."

"Remember, you're supposed to be a virgin."

"My measurements are forty double D, 24, 36, and I'm five foot five."

"I'll tell him."

"I've got to go. My noon hour John is knocking at the door."

I am about to call Michael back when Jane comes in with six other ghostwriters whose work I am unfamiliar with. I recognize all of their names, but with the exception of Samuel Beckett I could not have told you one word the other authors wrote in their lifetimes prior to Jane's preparatory introductions. "J.C., this is Upton Sinclair. He's the author of ninety books. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1943 for *Dragon's Teeth*," she tells me, and I am about to shake his hand out of habit until I remember the experience I had with putting my whole arm right through Henrik Ibsen. I nod my head instead.

"And this is Samuel Beckett. He won the Nobel Prize for his play *Waiting for Godot*," she

tells me.

"I read your play. How do you do?"

"This is Graham Greene. You might remember Brighton Rock or The Human Factor?" Jane says and I casually tell him that I do, but in reality I am ignorant to both books.

"John Cheever," she announces next, adding with a wave of her hand that he is the author of: "The Wapshot Chronicle and The Wapshot Scandal."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I say.

"This here's Henry Miller. He wrote Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn, which were both banned in the United States for being obscene."

"How do you do?"

"And last but not least," Jane says with a deep breath, "Mr. Isaac Bashevis Singer." And then she whispers into my ear, "He wrote Yentl: The Yeshiva Boy and he won the Nobel Prize in 1978."

"How do you do, Mr. Singer. It's a great honor to meet you, sir. In fact just recently me and Jane were talking about Yentl: The Yeshiva Boy. And by the way, didn't you win the Nobel Prize in 1978?"

He is smiling when he tells me that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his "impassioned narrative art," and it is an honor for me, I must say, to have been the source of his smiling face. I know firsthand how fragile an artist's ego can be in regards to their created work, so it was no great sacrifice on my behalf to have stroked his psyche some. I see it as a sort of counterbalance to the critics who constantly jump out from around every creative corner of an artist's life ready to attack.

After rearranging several chairs into a semi circle around the sofa the ghosts seat themselves in my room. Their casual conversation consists of little more than a few oblique remarks about New York City and the awful weather we've been having for the past week. I decide it's time to order drinks from room service and all of the ghosts agree. The bellhop brings two bottles of liquor and eight glasses per my request. I wait until he is gone, however, before I start pouring drinks to the satisfaction of everyone in the room. Refreshments in hand the ghosts begin to relax, and Jane says, "That poor bellhop must be wondering why you ordered so much to drink?"

"He knows I'm a writer, so he probably thinks I'm an alcoholic like Jack London," I joke.

"But you're not," Jane says.

"Not yet," I reply.

"Even if you were you wouldn't require eight separate glasses. A bottle and a brown paper bag would suffice," she says.

Earlier, immediately after arranging the chairs, I noticed that Jane chose to sit down on the wooden chair by the window where I work. It remains to be her favorite spot in the room, for almost every time she visits me she plops down in front of my computer. Of course when a ghost plops down on anything they never make a sound, so plop is probably not an appropriate description. "Silently down," would have been a better wording. Either way, she is sitting by my computer. Right now she is looking at the Random House Building. A moment later she glances at a paper printout of my work in progress that is scattered atop of my writing table. There is a page sticking out of my portable light weight printer that I'm sure will not go unnoticed by Ms. Austen's acute curiosity. "J.C., how is the new novel coming along?" she inquires, and as always it is with a tone of voice that tells me she truly cares and is not just being polite or making conversation for the sake of something to say. There has never been, nor is there now, anything

frivolous or phony about Jane Austen.

"Thanks to you, I've found the hero and the heroine," I inform her and then I watch with apprehension while she reads, like I knew she would, the pages before her.

"Michael Burrows?" she asks.

"The Michael Burrows?" asks the spirit of Graham Greene.

"I believe they are bankers." Mr. Miller states with an authoritative tone.

"Yes," I reply, "Michael's father, William (if I'm not mistaken) Burrows, owns The Burrows Bank of Manhattan."

"What's your heroine's name?" Jane asks, while reading farther down the page.

"Barbra Lovenstein."

"Sounds Jewish," Mr. Singer says.

"Barbra with only two a's," I tell everyone in the room.

"Like the singer," snorts Mr. Singer.

"Yes. Apparently Barbra's mother is a fan. She named her daughter after the superstar. Also, they were both born and raised in Brooklyn."

"What about her nose?" one of them inquires, but I am not sure which ghostwriter it was, for I had my back turned at the time pouring another round of drinks.

"What about it? It's a beautiful nose," I reply to the anonymous ghostwriter.

"Is it Jewish?" Mr. Miller asks, but his is not the voice belonging to the boorish bearer of the original question that so blatantly brought up the subject of Barbra's nose.

"Of course it's Jewish. She's Jewish. She's a Jewish princess."

"It says on this page she's a prostitute?" Jane, I can tell, takes immense pleasure in pointing out for the amusement of everyone in the room.

"A Jewish prostitute heroine with a huge honker," replies Upton Sinclair.

"How delightful," cries Mr. Cheever.

I deliberately interrupt the ghost's guffawing by announcing my need for Barbra and Michael to meet in a romantic way. "Now, that I have found my intangible lovers at last, I am ready to write a romantic rendezvous."

"Since she's a hooker and he's rich why don't you have him drive by her late one summer evening when he's horny... Oops, sorry, Jane, I didn't mean to offend you," Samuel Beckett says.

"Don't worry, Mr. Beckett, you didn't offend me. As a globe trotting ghost I have become the most liberated woman alive. At least I would be if I were alive." We all laugh and this time I allow the laughter to take its natural course, though of its own accord it ends rather abruptly, for the joke was far from being one of Jane Austen's best. "What were you saying, Mr. Beckett?" I ask when all the ghostwriters finish laughing; and though it is of little importance I am venturesome enough to say that Samuel Beckett laughed the longest.

"Oh right, well your hero sees her strutting her stuff, I believe is the common expression of the street, so he slams on the brakes of his fire red Ferrari, backs up and shouts: 'Hey, baby, hop in.' Then they drive off into the sunset, even though it already set several hours ago."

"And they live happily ever after," Mr. Singer adds sarcastically.

"I agree with Mr. Singer. I don't think anyone would believe it. Besides, it's already been done too many times before," I tell them. "No, they have to meet in a romantic setting and no one must ever find out that she was a prostitute. I am presenting her as a virgin."

"I don't see that it matters," Jane says. "People aren't as narrow-minded as they were when I was alive."

"You're right," I reply. "it matters only in so far as it is a fantasy. A formula romance novel that women will read on their way to work and escape into when the daily dreariness of their own lives becomes unbearably dull."

"Movie theaters are romantic," Jane comments. "They could bump into each other going to see *Gone With the Wind*. Or Barbra could drop her handbag from the balcony on top of Michael's head while watching *The Way We Were* or *Wuthering Heights*?"

"I'm sure it's been done before," I declare cautiously, and in keeping the tone of my voice even I hope to convey the fact that I am open to more of the ghostwriter's suggestions.

"How about Central Park?" says Jane. "I love walking through the park late at night."

"I'm sure it's a safe place at night if you're a ghost, but one of them is too apt to get mugged or murdered before they even meet," I reply.

"How about the zoo?" Mr. Cheever suggests.

"The zoo could be anywhere in New York City," I tell him.

"What about a traffic accident, or a subway mishap?" suggests Graham Greene.

"They could bump into each other during a black out in Manhattan?" says Upton Sinclair.

"There are an infinite number of ways for your protagonists to meet, particularly in New York City," Mr. Singer says with a slight sigh.

"There certainly are," agrees Graham Greene. "They could get stuck in an elevator together at the top of the World Trade Center. She could be a sales girl in Bloomingdale's Department Store and he could go in to buy something for his mother..."

"The one who's an invalid in a New Jersey nursing home, whom he goes to visit daily, because he's such a decent guy. How corny," Jane says. "Besides Barbra doesn't work at Bloomingdale's, she works the street."

"Barbra could be on her way to visit her poverty stricken parents in Brooklyn that live on the top floor of a tenement," Henry Miller proposes. "Michael could be going to Brooklyn for some undisclosed bank business and their eyes could meet as they are both driving in bumper to bumper traffic across the Williamsburg Bridge? Or better yet he could drive by her one night when she's about to commit suicide by jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge?"

"That's a wonderful idea," Samuel Beckett exclaims. "You could have Michael say something like: 'A girl with beauty such as yours should never be sad.'"

"And she could be naive enough to believe the sappy bastard," Jane scoffs.

Mr. Singer, finishing his drink, suggests, "Barbra's mother could be an abrasive woman and her father could be a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp and..."

"Hello everyone," Hans Christian Anderson calls out, as he comes into the room already full of writers. The Danish author, who died in 1875, is the only writer here today whose work I have read, with the exception of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*.

"Hans, how are you?" Jane asks, as she rises to her feet to greet our newly arrived guest.

"Very well, Jane," he replies and looking around the room he adds, "I do hope I'm not crashing a private party?"

"Not at all, Mr. Anderson," I tell him kindly, also rising respectfully to my feet. "Come in and make yourself at home. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'm fine thanks," he says.

Jane introduces him to the writers in the room one at a time. I offer him my chair next to Graham Greene, while seating myself on the foot of the bed.

"We were just talking about the book that J.C. is in the process of writing," Mr. Sinclair

explains.

"It's nothing compared to some of the imaginative stories you wrote, Mr. Anderson, classics like *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Little Mermaid*."

"We are trying to think of a way for his hero and heroine to meet," says Mr. Singer.

"You could have a third party introduce them - at a party?" Samuel Beckett suggests.

"She could be suffering from amnesia and be lost late at night in the Lincoln Tunnel. Michael could run her down in his Volkswagen Volvo, and they could fall in love on their way to the hospital," Mr. Cheever says.

"You're forgetting that Michael Burrows drives a Ferrari, not a Volkswagen Volvo," says Samuel Beckett.

"Then they will get to the hospital that much faster," replies Henry Miller.

Hans Christian Anderson, who has been listening intently until now, resolves to help find a way for Barbra and Michael to meet by offering the following: "I just came from Coney Island. It was a very atmospheric place filled with a wild array of characters. Why everywhere I looked there were young couples cuddling and kissing. So I was just thinking that maybe your hero and heroine could fall in love on the roller coaster and if you wanted to throw in a fragment of fear they could wind up trapped on top of the Ferris wheel?"

"It's not going to be a gothic romance, Mr. Anderson, so I don't want to have my heroine in any kind of imminent danger, but..." My writing muse makes itself heard and as always it does so when I least expect it. Inspired by the creative vision I've just had I cry out to everyone in the room. "I've got it," and all of the ghosts turn their heads to look towards me. For no particular reason, I choose to fix my gaze upon the foremost dramatist in "theater of the absurd," Samuel Beckett, but then having gained the attention of all the renowned writers in the room I find myself too bashful to begin.

"What is it?" Jane asks. "Tell us," she gently adds.

"They could meet at Madison Square Gardens."

To my horror no one in the room responds with the enthusiasm that I was hoping to hear. No one in the room says anything at all until finally Mr. Singer breaks the silence by saying, "What's so amazing about that?"

"Nothing really," I reply, "but what if they get married at Madison Square Gardens in front of an enormous crowd. Then after the minister pronounces them husband and wife they could consummate their marriage in front of the thousands of people. They could fornicate for the first time on the field. Onlookers will cheer them on. In a frenzy people will throw popcorn and peanuts as opposed to rice. I could make all the arrangements necessary for the event beforehand. Research the city bylaws. Find out how much it will cost to rent the arena. I could advertise in the New York Times and I could sell tickets. It will be the talk of the town. 'Are you going to see the sex show?' I could have some secondary character say. 'Everyone in New York City is going to see the sex show,' some other colorful character can reply. I will hire a big name sportscaster to emcee the event. 'Ladies and gentlemen, with their naked bodies bathed in baby oil the couple will now copulate in the arena for your viewing pleasure.' Television cameras will capture their coition and a live broadcast of the event will be aired worldwide. Their grunts and groans will be clearly understood in all global languages. Wrestling and writhing together in the arena, with Michael wearing a condom of course, it will be a sort of spectator sport for anyone who wants to come. Sailors and servicemen of all sorts will come to see the "SEXIBITION," which is what I will call the show. One section of the stands will be filled with various high school football

teams, who have come statewide into the city to watch. And while cheerleaders rant, 'Raw! Raw! Raw!' husbands and wives, who have come from the suburbs to watch Barbra and Michael make love in a wide variety of positions, will pick up pointers to take back with them to their boring bedrooms. 'Encore,' the crowd will cry out after Barbra and Michael each have an earth-shattering orgasm that shakes the entire stadium. Then Barbra and Michael will do it again, and again, and again. They will continue to please the crowd with their primeval urges, until their spent sweat covered bodies lie exhausted in the arena. Putting the passion that poured from every pore of their persons down on paper for all of posterity will be my job, and a joy it will be, for thanks to their repeat performances I will have more than enough erotic material to fill the pages of the greatest love story ever written. And though it may be regarded as the most pornographic romance of the century and of world literature, critics will be compelled to call it an instant classic. They will rave about Michael Burrows and Barbra Lovenstein's sex show forevermore; and mainly because my agent, Mr. Morris, was right when he said, 'Sex sells!'"

Chapter Eight

Of all the suggestions given to me by the ghostwriters the day before conceit causes me to like my own Madison Square Gardens meeting the most. But, as there are laws governing the prohibition of sex acts in public places in New York City, not to mention everywhere else in the world where cities are civilized, I am obliged to send Barbra and Michael on a blind date, which I believe is bound to be a boring affair until it begins and thereafter I am led by my writing muse to learn otherwise.

It is a warm summer day when Michael Burrows and Barbra Lovenstein meet for the first time. He picks her up in his fire red Ferrari on a Friday afternoon and it is very similar indeed to Samuel Beckett's suggestion of how they should meet. It just so happens that Michael picks Barbra up on the same street where I first saw her, though I had nothing to do with him driving down to the Lower East Side. They discussed the details of their date themselves over the telephone, so it was a prearranged meeting place between the two parties. Michael was, however, slightly suspicious of the area in which she stood waiting. "Why are there so many women lined up on the street?" he wondered, yet one look at Barbra's long luscious legs, her voluptuous chest, and her beautiful face, put any doubts he had about her into the back of his mind. She was far too lovely to have anything in common with those hookers, he thought to himself. Though I believe the expression: "A stiff penis has no conscience," could have been the cause of his carefree attitude at the time.

"What would you like to do?" he asks her attentively and he is watching her surreptitiously, as she pulls the mini skirt she is wearing down a fraction of an inch, so that Michael, the man she is destined to marry, will not see (so early on the date) that she is not wearing any underwear. "I don't know," she replies. "I've always wanted to go to the Bronx zoo."

"I've been there, but I hate seeing animals locked up in cages for human beings to look at," Michael says.

"I never thought about it before, but you're right, it's wrong," Barbra replies.

"We could stroll through Central Park? Feed the ducks and the pigeons?"

"What about a movie? Wuthering Heights is playing not too far from here? So is Gone With the Wind and The Way We Were?"

"Sure if you want?" Michael says.

"Not really. It was just a suggestion. I hate going to the movies. I don't know what made me think of it."

"Do you like baseball?" Michael asks.

Barbra's eyes light up, like an electronic scoreboard. "I love the game."

"The Red Sox and the Yankees are playing tonight. I've got season tickets."

"Fantastic. Let's go."

"I've got to drop by my bank for a few minutes. Do you mind?"

Barbra shakes her head. She is already so infatuated she would follow Michael off the edge of the earth in his Ferrari if that was his destination. But, as the author of this book, I can tell you that it isn't. He drives directly to his father's bank in the Financial District. He parks his Ferrari rather carelessly in the underground garage in a spot reserved solely for the vice-president. Beside it is the bank president's parking space, where during the day his father's regal looking Rolls Royce resides. "Do you want to come up? I'll show you my office," Michael says, stepping out of the car. "Don't worry. It's after hours. Everyone except for the janitors and the security guards have gone home," he adds when Barbra shows signs of being a little reluctant to leave the car. Her reluctance could have something to do with the fact that she is wearing her work clothes. Without waiting for her to reply he runs around the car and he opens her door like a gentleman. Then together they get into the executive elevator. "It's on the forty fifth floor," Michael informs her.

The elevator climbs quickly up the office tower. They are on the thirtieth floor when the power in the building begins to fluctuate. They have only reached the thirty second floor when the power dissipates altogether and the elevator stops with an alarming jolt. The doors remain closed and even more devastating for Barbra, who is afraid of the dark, the lights go out. It is so black inside the elevator they can not see each other at all. Barbra is frightened. Reaching out for Michael she believes that all of Manhattan is having a power shortage of some sort. "We're trapped in an elevator during a black out," she cries.

"No, it's happened before," Michael says reassuringly. "The maintenance crew will have it going again in no time." It takes ten minutes, which feels like an eternity to Barbra, but thankfully there is no city wide black out like the author Upton Sinclair suggested.

After finding the file he needs they leave the Burrows' building and while driving back uptown towards Yankee Stadium, Michael says, "We've still got a couple of hours before the game. I usually go visit my mother in New Jersey every Friday after work, and..."

"How come she lives in New Jersey?" Barbra asks.

"She's an invalid. She's had several strokes. She lives in a nursing home. It's the nicest one in the country, but she gets lonely. Would you mind if we drove over? It's her birthday and I have to give her a present. She's sort of expecting me. I was planning on going this morning, but I got held up in one meeting after another."

"I'd love to go. I've never been to New Jersey." Barbra is not as pleased about the idea as she pretends, but like I said she would drive off the edge of the earth with Michael, and regardless of the opinion held by most New Yorkers New Jersey is not at the ends of the earth.

"Well there's not a lot to see," Michael assures her.

"That's ok," Barbra replies good-naturedly, for it has just occurred to her that there is

something very promising in his willingness for her to meet his mother. Moreover, she can tell, by his pale upper lip, that very recently he shaved off a mustache. It just so happens that she likes her heroes to be clean shaven. "I could never fall in love with a man who had hair on his face," she would say to me after I confessed that it was I who coerced Michael into shaving off his mustache. At the moment, though, Barbra is wishing she had worn something less revealing, but how could she have guessed that she was going to meet Michael's mother?

On their way to New Jersey Barbra and Michael have John Cheever to thank for the following, for they are driving through the Lincoln Tunnel when the Ferrari gets a flat. "Fuck," Michael says when the tire blows. He manages to pull safely out of the way of the traffic in the tunnel. He tells Barbra to wait in the car while he talks to one of the tunnel attendants to find out where he can change the tire. "Fuck," he says again as he is foraging in the trunk for his tool box. Barbra, hearing him swear and wondering if she can help, gets out of the car through the drivers door, for the passengers door is too close to the side of the tunnel to open. Stepping out of the car she does not see the Volkswagen Volvo until it is too late for her to do anything but freeze and accept her fate. It is not too late, however, for her hero. He jumps up just in time and pulls her over the hood of the car. The Volvo whizzes by without any mishap occurring, while Barbra makes the most of the moment in Michael's muscular arms. She is not hurt, so there is no need for her to be rushed to the hospital like Mr. Cheever suggested.

The car and Barbra both are entirely unscathed when they reach the New Jersey nursing home. Here they visit Michael's mother (the bedridden Evelyn Burrows) for only a short while before heading back to Manhattan. They arrive at Yankee Stadium just in time to see the opening pitch of the ball game. The Red Sox are the first up to bat. "This is so exciting. I've never been to a ball game before," Barbra gushes, and batting her eyes at Michael her long lashes brush against his cheek. Their physical attraction for each other has not waned one iota since they met that afternoon. Aroused by the excitement of the game and by his exotic date snuggled next to him Michael deliberately rubs his thigh against her silk stocking stuffed leg. Barbra's response is enthusiastic to say the least. She begins to gyrate her pelvis on the hard seat. Michael, even more excited by her erotic movements, masterfully puts his hand on her thigh. Barbra opens her legs enough to let him know that his hand is welcome to wander. Inching his thumb and his four fingers farther up her thigh, Barbra closes her eyes and thinks how wonderful his hand feels, as though a large soft seductive spider were walking on her silk stocking. And when it crawls under her mini skirt she is equally aroused, so much so that she begins to wriggle her rear end. Michael is thrilled to find he does not have to fight his way through a pair of panties, for his probing fingers find the root of her wetness right away. The couple can not control their ecstatic urges any longer, or so it would seem to those who were watching, because while Michael's fingers roam around her rear end in exploration, Barbra unzips his fly and the popcorn box that was nestled between them falls by their feet. Bending over his lap she puts his penis directly into her mouth and begins to suck it per his request, and while he grabs her breasts with one hand he shoves a saliva soaked finger up her rear end with his other. The Jones's, sitting on the opposite side of the stadium with a pair of binoculars between them, are the first of many to notice the careless couple carried away in a moment of passion. Soon though several more people become aware of what's going on and are predisposed to spy on the promiscuous pair. Mr. Jones fights with Mrs. Jones to regain possession of the binoculars just as Barbra and Michael are told to leave the stadium by two security guards.

The security guards were hastened by some other onlookers, who could hear Barbra and

Michael moaning even above the cheering of the crowd. Barbra wasn't lying when she told me she was "the loudest lay on the Lower East Side," nor was she faking the orgasm she had just as a batter for the Yankees hit the home run that won the game. Regrettably not even the roar that arose from the crowd in the stadium was enough to drown out the loudness of Barbra and Michael's lovemaking, because even the ball players in the field were said to have heard her.

"I'm starving," Barbra says to Michael, as she skips across the parking lot towards the Ferrari.

"Let's drive to Brooklyn and get a bite to eat," Michael suggests, for he wants very much to meet her parents. Barbra has reservations about ever going back to Brooklyn, but she eventually gives way to Michael's wish by agreeing to go, and before she knows it they are en route to her parents apartment. They drive along Columbus Avenue until they come to Columbus Circle where they turn onto Broadway Avenue. Driving down Broadway Avenue until they come to Times Square they turn onto Seventh Avenue. They drive through the outskirts of Greenwich Village, through the center of Soho, and then they decide to stop in Chinatown for dinner, because Barbra is famished by now and refuses to go any farther without food. Michael believes she is stalling, but Barbra later informs me that she simple could not bear the idea of facing her folks on an empty stomach. When they finish their full course meal they leave the oriental restaurant replenished and I am praying that they will take the Manhattan Bridge, so as to steer clear of the suicide that Samuel Beckett mentioned. Then before I know it they have turned onto the Brooklyn Bridge and there is nothing that I can do. A U-turn is no longer possible and to revise their date at this point in time seems redundant. Hindsight says differently, for I would have rewritten this entire scene if I'd known they were going to run out of gas halfway across the bridge. I am in a state of total panic now and furthermore I am furious, for Michael finds it necessary to swear once again. "God damn it I forgot to fill up the fucking gas tank."

Barbra laughs and says something about him doing it deliberately, but they both know that no such ploy was required. Since they already had sex at Yankee Stadium there was no need for Michael to run out of gas to "get in her pants," particularly since she WASN'T WEARING ANY! Waiting for the tow truck to come with a gallon or two of gasoline, Barbra, standing on the bridge breathing in the night air, watches a schooner sail into pier seventeen. A moment later she is staring directly down into the East River. I can see that she is thinking about jumping into the water below, for she does not want to go back to Brooklyn and she does not relish the idea of going back to being a prostitute either. Presently, she is standing in the middle of her two lives. Her past being Brooklyn and a procession of unpleasant memories, and the present being a prostitute in Manhattan and "the loudest lay on the Lower East Side."

"Hold on, for your future is close at hand," I want to holler, but how could she possibly hear me when I am miles away at the Waldorf=Astoria? Being unable to communicate the depth of my concern distresses me, as do her stifled sobs. It is within my power to make Michael notice the tearful eyes of his date, so I do just that. Touching her cheek tenderly with the back of his hand he gently urges her to look up from the river. There is something cold and hard in her eyes as well, which I am unable to keep Michael from noticing. I am aghast to believe that my heroine is going to kill herself before her romance has a chance to blossom into a full blown love affair and a best-selling book, but Michael puts my mind at ease by placing his arm around her and saying with more sweetness and sincerity than Barbra has ever been spoken to by a man before, "A girl with beauty such as yours should never be sad." Just then the tow truck arrives to rescue them and my story.

Mr. Miller was right when he said that her parents live on the top floor of a tenement, though

he failed to mention the cockroaches, the noisy neighbors, the obscene graffiti covering the walls, and the drug dealers lurking in the downstairs entranceway. My protagonists arrive on the top floor intact, where Barbra knocks on her parent's apartment door. She immediately turns to leave. "They're not home, let's go."

Michael smiles just as Barbra's mother bellows from behind the closed door, and Isaac Bashevis Singer was right when he said that she was an abrasive woman. "Whoever's knocking on my door at two in the morning had better be gettin' murdered."

"It's me, mama," Barbra calls.

Mrs. Lovenstein, known to her neighbors as "loudmouthed Beatrice" unlocks the door and opens it part way. "Barbra, is that you? Surprise. Surprise. Hey, guess who's come to visit," she hollers to her husband Saul.

Mr. Singer was even more accurate when he said that her father was a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. Mr. Lovenstein's deep harsh voice is heard from within the vicinity of another room. "Don't let no frigging Nazi's in here," he yells in reply to his wife, and I should inform you now that both of their voices have an even more prominent Brooklyn accent than their daughter's does.

"It's Barbra."

"Who?" hollers Mr. Lovenstein.

"It's your darling daughter. The one we thought was dead," her mother says with not as much meanness as I'm sure the remark itself must summon in your imagination. "Well for goodness sake don't just stand there in the hallway with a blank look on your face, Barbra, come on in." Barbra and Michael both overlooked the fact that Mrs. Lovenstein, oddly enough, was still standing in the doorway when she said, "Come on in;" and several moments go by before she finally moves back to let them pass.

They all enter the tiny immaculately clean living room. Michael takes off his shoes of his own accord, but Barbra leaves on her high stiletto heels. "Hello, Papa," she says, while leaning over to kiss her father's cheek. Mr. Lovenstein is sitting in the same chair he was sitting in the very last time she saw him several years ago. Barbra also notices that nothing about the apartment has changed. It is all as she remembers.

"Sit down. Sit down," says Mrs. Lovenstein. "Can I get either of you anything to drink? A cup of tea?"

"Nothing for me, thanks, Mrs. Lovenstein," Michael answers with a nervous laugh.

"Mom, dad, this is Michael Burrows."

"It's nice to meet you and I must say you look like a very nice young man compared to some of the thugs my daughter used to date. Not that she hardly ever brought home any of her men friends for her us to meet. You'd think she was ashamed of us or something."

"I'm not ashamed, mama. I just don't like coming back to Brooklyn. There are too many bad memories."

Mrs. Lovenstein takes to looking at Michael intently. She inspects his expensive clothing with a cold mercenary eye. Satisfied with what she sees of his apparel she looks up from his argyle socks and says, "You should have seen her on her sixteenth birthday. She was the most beautiful girl in the neighborhood. Everybody said so. Of course that was before she started to dress up like a whore."

"Mama!"

"We gave her a big sweet sixteen birthday party and then two days later she moved to

Manhattan with some man." Mrs. Lovenstein politely leaves out the fact that he was her pimp, or perhaps on her part it was merely a case of absentmindedness. "We've hardly seen her since. How old are you now, Barbra?"

"You know perfectly well how old I am, mama. I'm twenty two."

Mr. Lovenstein, who so far has been reluctant to stop watching whatever he has tuned into on the television set, turns to his daughter. "Barbra?" he says, as though he has just seen his daughter for the first time and was unaware of her being in his living room all along.

"Yes, papa, it's me. How are you doing?"

"I'm a survivor," he snarls.

"He's doing all right. The doctor's say he won't get any better, but I take good care of him."

"I know you do, mamma. I wish there was more I could do."

"Do? What can any of us do? Do? Do?" she continues on despairingly. "Everyday the man becomes more and more deranged. He thinks we're still at war with Germany. He believes the Nazis are going to break down the door and drag him off to another concentration camp. And the doctors, they don't know what to do. Do?" she says, shaking her head hopelessly.

Barbra has seen and heard enough. She is determined to leave and in a moments time she stands up to do just that. "We have to go," she says while kissing them both good bye. Then into her mother's ear she whispers, "I'll send you some more money at the end of the month."

On their way out Mrs. Lovenstein stops Michael by the door, and sighing she says, "I don't know why she didn't become a singer like her namesake."

"I can't sing, mamma," Barbra exclaims impatiently and then she says good bye to her mother once again.

Michael does not want the date to end, so when they are safely inside the Ferrari with their seat belts fastened, he asks, "Feel like a drive to Coney Island?"

"It's closed," Barbra is obliged to reply, and I am happy to say that Hans Christian Anderson's idea about them getting trapped on top of a Ferris wheel will not happen.

It is five thirty in the morning, however, when Michael finally drives her home and on her doorstep with the sun just starting to rise on the horizon he leans over and kisses Barbra for the first time. When beginning to write this chapter I was gullible enough to believe that a good night kiss (a peck on the cheek) was all he was going to give her. Since this is a romance novel they were supposed to wait until they are husband and wife before getting intimately involved. Also, according to the formula romance novels that I read they're not even allowed to French kiss, which is what they are doing right now, until their second or third date. Suffice to say I just assumed that sex was out of the question, and all I can say to those of you who were hoping for a long courtship filled with wooing, with big boxes of chocolates, and bouquets of freshly cut flowers, is that Barbra Lovenstein was certainly never supposed to suck Michael off, and I never believed for a minute that Michael Burrows would be so bold as to stick his index finger up her asshole on their first date. Furthermore, it never dawned on me that Barbra would like it as much as she did, or that Michael would forget to wash his hands before finger feeding himself Chinese food at dinner.

Chapter Nine

Jane's back, and once again she has brought with her a group of ghostwriters. They are all well known women who appear to be in very good spirits.

"How did it go?" Jane asks upon entering my hotel room and she too seems to be in a gracious mood.

"How did what go?" I ask distractedly, for at the moment I am compelled to watch in awe as one renowned woman after another comes into my room.

"How did your hero and heroine's meeting go?" she inquires.

"It was romantic," I reply with unusual reserve, for I do not want to go into the details of Barbra and Michael's erotic blind date with so many distinguished ladies in the room.

"Are they madly in love?" Jane asks.

"It's too early to tell, and I haven't done any work for the past few days. I am ashamed to say, in front of you all, that I have writer's block."

"Maybe we can help," Jane says. "You know everyone here, don't you?"

"I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting any of you ladies, though I'm familiar with all of your life's work. Louisa May Alcott, you were born in Germantown, Pennsylvania and raised in Boston. You wrote *Little Women*."

"It was an autobiographical novel about my childhood," Ms. Alcott says.

"Sitting beside Ms. Alcott is Flannery O'Connor. You wrote two novels and one of them was called *Wise Blood*. Two short story collections and one of them was called *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, but correct me if I'm wrong?"

"You are absolutely right," she says with a southern drawl. "A good man is hard to find," she exclaims and all the ladies laugh.

"Next is Pearl Buck. Your parents were American missionaries. You spent the first half of your life in China. You won the Nobel Prize and you wrote *The Good Earth*."

"Which won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction," she adds to my short biographical statement.

"Harriet Stowe, you were born in Connecticut, but while staying in Brunswick, Maine, you wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the most powerful novel of its kind. A forceful indictment of slavery."

"Yes, it did much to bring about militant antislavery sentiment in the North. It was an important factor in precipitating the American Civil War if I do say so myself."

"Sitting on the sofa beside Harriet Stowe is the ghost of Gertrude Stein. You coined the phrase "The Lost Generation," in reference to expatriate American writers living in Paris during the 1920's and 30's where you spent most of your life. If I remember correctly you wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*."

"It was actually my own autobiography," she explains.

"And Alice B. Toklas. You were born in San Francisco, but you and Ms. Stein lived together in Paris. A collection of your letters *Staying on Alone* were published posthumously."

"Gertrude and I were lovers. She died twenty one years before me," says Ms. Toklas.

"We're still lovers," announces Ms. Stein.

"Katherine Anne Porter. You won the Pulitzer Prize for *Collected Stories* and you are regarded as one of the leading modern writers of short stories. You wrote one novel, but at the moment I don't remember the name of it?"

"*Ship of Fools*," she says to the enlightenment of likely only myself.

"And last but not least Lillian Hellman. You were born in New Orleans. You wrote *The Little*

Foxes."

"And several other plays," she adds.

"How did I do?"

"Much better than could be expected," Jane says and all the ghosts agree, for they clap their hands to congratulate me, but of course the sound of their clapping can not be heard.

"I wonder where George is?" Gertrude Stein says.

"She should be here soon," Katherine Anne Porter replies.

"George?" I ask, but before anyone can explain the ghost of George Sand, the forerunner of the women's liberation movement, manifests herself in my hotel room. A prolific writer of novels, none of which I have read, she led a life full of love affairs that shocked Parisian society in the early 1800's. I am not sure what her real name is. George Sand is a pseudonym. "Sorry I'm late," Ms. Sand says upon materializing in the midst of us all. "I forgot the room number, so, very discreetly of course, I checked at the front desk. Then on my way up in the elevator it dawned on me that when I was alive I was never discreet, but now that I'm dead discretion has become my middle name." Chuckling she turns around and she sees me just as she is in the process of asking, "Where's that Clover-Cook character that I've heard so much about?"

"Right here," I reply.

"How do you do? We've never met. I'm George Sand." She walks through the coffee table, the pile of The New Yorker magazines, and she meets me in the middle of the room. Here, we smile at each other, since we are unable to shake hands. I often wonder if the ghosts ever get frustrated on account of their inability to feel solid matter, a luxury that we, the living, take for granted. How surreal it must be to have no surroundings in the physical sense, I think to myself. There must be a great deal of isolation and loneliness in being a ghost, I conclude.

"Can you feel each other?" I ask and in directing this question as I have done towards any one of the writers in the room I have inadvertently set myself up for several amusing answers the least of which is:

"Oh, honey, don't get us going," says Gertrude Stein in regards to herself and her lover Alice B. Toklas.

"What I mean is when you touch anything you go right through it, so how in the world are you capable of cohesive contact with each other?"

"Well, when we want to pick something up for example we have to concentrate on the object we wish to retrieve otherwise the object in question will pass right through us," Jane explains.

"Then ghosts must use a great deal of willpower?" I inquire.

"Willpower is what brings us back from the dead," says the ghost of Gertrude Stein.

"We are ethereal beings," Jane continues to explain. "As spirits we can feel the essence of each other. We can feel the conformation of atoms in solid objects and the life force in living people, though our sense of touch is much more subliminal than yours. The two biggest differences between the dead and the living is that our state of being is eternal, unlike yours, and we can not take part in the physical world the way the living do."

"But, you're here now?" I say.

"Oh, we can inhabit the earth and we do, but we can not, to use your own words "make cohesive contact" for long in any dimension other than our own. In other words death has diminished us all to a great degree. I can not write another book, because I no longer have a body in the physical world that will allow me to compose for the countless hours that it would take. We belong entirely to another dimension. That's why when we pass through a living being they

usually experience a sensation similar to a cold breeze blowing through their body and it is usually a bit unsettling for both parties."

"I remember all too well the feeling I have when my arm went right through the playwright Henrik Ibsen. It was made worse, I suppose, because at the time I was unsuspecting."

Watching the ladies, as they all take turns looking at each other, I am led to believe, and rightly so, that they are conspiring something against me. "Of course, I don't know why I didn't think of it before," Jane says excitedly. "J.C., sit down in your chair."

There are several in the room and none of them belong to me personally, so I am not sure which one she is referring to. "The one at your computer," she tells me impatiently and since it is the only chair not presently occupied by a ghost I suppose I should have assumed that it was the one she was speaking of.

After obeying her I find myself facing the window with my back to the ghostwriters. No sooner have I done so when I see at the very edge of my peripheral vision that Jane has vanished into nothing more than a vapor and in this nebulous state she begins billowing towards me. Frightened of not knowing what to expect I lean forward instinctively. I bang my elbows against my writing table accidentally just as Jane makes the journey inside of me, but more importantly perhaps to a parapsychologist is the fact that I am inside of her. It would seem that at the moment we are one. Yet, she has complete control over my body, while I on the other hand am totally subservient to her pervading spirit. The eerie experience is not an unpleasant one per se, nor is it in any way painful. Convinced that I have no reason to be afraid I slowly begin to relax. Being that I am not a fearful person by nature it is rather an easy task. I am not, after all, teetering precariously atop of the Empire State Building, for a fear of heights I do have. Also, to be completely honest, dying suddenly and leaving an unfinished manuscript behind is another fear that often gets the better of me. I have always been perversely fascinated, if not altogether envious, of authors who commit suicide thereby controlling their own destiny to a degree and giving them the ability, if they so desire, to leave no unfinished work behind. The loss of a manuscript in a fire is another fear that plagues me periodically. It is also a hazard that I safeguard against to an obsessive extreme by making backup copies of every draft from the first to the final. "Odd, since you yourself have been known to attempt the destruction of your manuscripts," Jane says, for residing inside of me has given her the ability to read my mind. Moreover, I knew what she was going to say before she said it, since I can also read her thoughts. Her spirit, however, is wholly possessing, for when she speaks my lips move to utter her words and my voice is the voice of an eighteenth century English woman by the name of Jane Austen. "And remember there is no glory in being a ghostwriter," I am forced to tell myself. I try to protest, but at present she is the more powerful of the two. And to prove to you readers that her spirit is stronger than my body observe us as she lifts my arms into a horizontal position. Though I still have a will of my own I realize it is no use whatsoever, as I helplessly watch my hand turn on the computer in front of us. With my fingers on the keyboard she forces me to type and I know that from now on Jane will be wanting to use my body to write another book of her own. I also know that she could never be happy being a "ghostwriter" in accordance with the dictionary's definition of the word. How do I know all this? The possibility of using my person to pen another novel spread through her thoughts like wildfire and when I look at the computer screen I can see that together we typed a title page: Another Novel, By a Lady. "By a Lady" was the pseudonym of sorts used by Jane for her first published novel. Thereafter when each of her novels were released they said, "by the author of *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Sense and Sensibility*, or

whichever the case might be, and thereby Jane Austen's authorship remained anonymous to nearly everyone who read her books. After a telepathic good bye she leaves my body as quickly as she inhabited it. Jolted and then startled to feel her vacate my flesh so suddenly (since I was becoming quite accustomed to her presence) I am left with an empty sensation in the center of my being. "That was amazing, absolutely amazing," I exclaim with my own voice.

Throughout the remainder of the day everyone of the ghostwriters in my room take turns possessing me. It is early in the evening before Jane and the rest of the ladies have gone. Alone in my hotel room I read the computer printouts of what every one of the ghostwriters left behind after visiting my body. The respective title pages by each and everyone of the renowned women: Another Novel, Another Short Story, Another Play, inspire me to sit down at my computer. Thanks to the ghostwriters my block is gone and once again I begin to write. I stop to glance for no more than a moment at the remaining lights that are on in the Random House Building; and behold dear reader I am transported via my imagination into my heroine's humble flat on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Here, I am horror stricken by the sight I see. "You were supposed to wait for approximately five more chapters before having sex, but here you both are naked, unwed, and screwing like a pair of wild animals. This is a romance novel! Wasn't your sex scene at Yankee Stadium enough? It not only ruined my plot, and all of my hard work, it nearly got you both arrested. And now, thanks to your libidos, I will have to start all over again. Put your clothes on, both of you."

Barbra puts on her bra and panties and then she slips back into the cotton dress she was wearing before a sexually aroused Michael ripped it off. As she begins brushing her long black hair I observe, much to my satisfaction, that her face is free of any make-up. Meanwhile, Michael steps into a pair of Khaki shorts, and I am pleased to report that he has been working out. And if the bulging muscles on his bare arms and legs are any indication, which I'm convinced they are for where else could they have come from, I would say that he has been working out on a regular basis.

Once they are dressed they cuddle together on the small overstuffed sofa across from me. With a minimal amount of anger I look at them both and ask, "So, what do you have to say for yourself, Barbra Lovenstein?"

"The sex is great and I love him with all my heart."

"What about you, Michael Burrows?"

"The sex is fantastic and I love her with all my heart as well."

What's done is done, I decide, and at least they love each other. I might as well make the most of their copulating prematurely; and it is in the midst of this mental rewrite that my muse rises to the occasion and I have the beginnings of a brainstorm. "Break open a big bottle of champagne. The best that money can buy. This calls for a celebration."

"What about the book?" one of them ask. I was too busy brainstorming to notice which of the two.

"Don't worry about the book. We'll pretend your sexual exploits never happened. Pour the Dom Perignon, raise your glasses triumphantly, and drink to your everlasting love. That's right. A toast to Michael and Barbra. May all the days of your life together be filled with joyful bliss and may you live happily ever after."

Emptying her glass of cheap white wine, because that was all that my heroine could find in her refrigerator, Barbra looks at me coquettishly and croons, "Now can we have sex?"

"Not quite yet, but soon," I tell her. "According to the romance novels that I read you have to

have a fight first. There has to be some kind of conflict between the two characters to create tension. A slow build up between the protagonists to promote marked anticipation."

"Why?" Michael and Barbra both want to know.

"So that when you do get together it's more climatic."

"But there is no tension between us. We've loved each other since the first day we met," Barbra confesses.

"That's good. That's why we're celebrating, but the way I figure it we have to give the readers their money's worth. There must be something you can fight about?"

"We get along great," Michael says.

"Oh, come now you two, there must be something that you hate about one and other? Something the other does that annoys you?"

"No," they both claim.

"Barbra, does he pee on the toilet seat? Michael, does she leave her used tampons lying around? Does he pick his nose with his bare finger? Do either of you leave the cap off the toothpaste? Does he chew with his mouth open? How long does she take to get dressed for a date? Does he look at other women? Does she flirt with other men? Does he belch at the dinner table? Has she farted in front of you yet?"

"J.C. we've been together for several weeks now and so far nothing bothers me about Barbra. She's the most beautiful girl I've ever known."

"And everybody farts, J.C.," Barbra protests.

"Well of course, but not in tales of romance. I can't imagine Juliet farting in front of Romeo, and I'm sure your namesake didn't pass gas when she was trying to get Robert Redford in *The Way We Were*."

"Fine, J.C., if that's the way you want it I won't fart in front of Michael from this day forward."

"You can both fart all you want, far be it for me to stop you. The last thing I want is a couple of constipated characters. Just keep them quiet enough so the reader won't hear."

Still sitting beside each other on the sofa they share a secretive smile, which I'm sure has something to do with the way Michael sheepishly raised his right buttock. I am looking towards my lap at some loose leaf notes that I scribbled down the day before, but Michael's resounding reply does not go unnoticed, nor does the dispersing odor. Looking up from my notes I do my best to ignore their impish grins. "Now where was I? Oh, yes, the fight. Well there must be something you can argue about? Even a small disagreement will suffice. Maybe you could fight about your future in-laws?"

"I love Michael's parents," Barbra claims.

Michael, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders, says, "Mr. and Mrs. Lovenstein are great. We took them out for dinner last week and we all had a terrific time. I've never laughed so hard in my life. Mr. Lovenstein accused the waiter of being a Nazi."

"What are you talking about? I didn't write that. How could I not have known anything about it? The readers weren't aware."

"It was just a quick dinner," Barbra explains.

"And what did you do afterwards? Never mind I don't want to know."

"We went to Coney Island," Michael informs me nonetheless, and even though I am afraid to ask them if they rode on the Ferris wheel I am forced to do so for a variety of reasons. Mainly, though, my own curiosity is the cause of my inquiry.

Grinning mischievously, Michael replies, "It got stuck and we were trapped on top for nearly two hours."

"It wasn't so bad. It was a nice night and we got to make love under the stars," Barbra informs me with a rather lustful look in her girlish green eyes.

"I think I'm still suffering from writer's block. I'm going to go. I will do my best to get back to you both tomorrow."

"What about our love scene?" Barbra exclaims suddenly, snuggling up to Michael.

"You haven't had a fight yet," I reply. "There's been no build up of tension."

"Would you settle for a little S&M?" Barbra says and I assume she is only joking or trying to shock me.

"Hush up. Do you want my readers to hear you? There will be no sadomasochistic scenes in this book. You keep your handcuffs and your whips and chains in the closet. As for your making love for the first time I'm tired of arguing with you, so go ahead. I guess it will be all right. It will have to be, but before you begin I'd better make sure I have enough memory left on my computer in case you go on forever..." Failing to laugh at my makeshift joke I conclude that they are both computer illiterate. "Ok, go ahead. Michael, pour her another glass of wine and whisper something romantic. Whatever you do don't just tear off her dress like you did before. And don't just sit there looking like an imbecile waiting for her to make the first move. Tell her she's beautiful. No, tell her she's the most breathtakingly beautiful woman that has ever walked the earth. Touch her cheek. Tenderly. Kiss her. Softly, don't slobber all over her face like a Saint Bernard. Kiss her ever so gently on the lips. Feel her breasts. Stand up, both of you. Slip her dress off slowly and seductively. Ok, now take off her bra. The clasp is on the front. Put one of her nipples into your mouth. Nibble it, but not too hard."

"She likes it hard," Michael moans.

"Barbra!"

"What?"

"Get up off your knees. What are you doing? Where are your manners? This is a romance novel not a titillating piece of pornography. Promise me no more blow-jobs for the rest of the book."

"I promise," she purrs, but I am obliged to inform you readers that not only did she have an avarice look in her eyes when she made the oath she was lasciviously licking her lips and was looking at Michael's enlarged organ. Like my pledge to keep Michael's obscenities at bay I will do my best, however good they may be, to keep Barbra's blow-jobs out of the book as well.

"All right, Barbra, lie down on the sofa and Michael you get on top of her. Stop!"

"Now, what the hell's the matter?" Michael demands to know.

"I think you forgot something," I say smugly.

"What? I told her I love her. I told her she's beautiful? I kissed her. What more do you want?"

"I want you to wear a condom. Go into the bathroom and put one on this instant."

While he is gone I look at Barbra lying naked on the sofa and ask, "Doesn't he usually wear one?"

"Yes, always. I guess we just forgot."

I am ready to begin lecturing her about the dangers of unsafe sex when Michael returns with the latex condom covering his erect penis.

"Did you check the expiration date on the package?" I inquire.

"Yeah, yeah," Michael replies and I know damn well that he didn't.

"Ok, get on top of her again. Barbra, don't spread your legs quite so wide. You'd think you were letting in the whole world."

"Michael likes it when I lie like this," she tells me, turning her head sideways to give me another one of her coquet looks.

"Fine, go ahead. Give it to her, Michael. Take it from him, Barbra."

"Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me," Barbra screams salaciously and like the wild banshee woman that Michael said she would become.

"Barbra," I bellow, "remember the book. The odd "oh yeah baby" is allowed, but..."

"Oh yeah, Michael," pants Barbra breathlessly.

"Oh yeah, Barbra," Michael pants breathlessly as well.

"You really do make a perfect couple. Now, tell him how good it feels. Tell her how much you love her. Michael, no hickies. Barbra, stop clawing his back. Great, now have an orgasm. No, not you, Michael. You have to wait until the girl has eight or nine of them all in a row."

"I can't last much longer," Michael moans with bated breath.

"Just a little while longer. Concentrate on something other than how good it feels."

"Your prowess is out of this world," Barbra cries in an unbridled way, for Michael continues to penetrate her relentlessly, as though his goal were to become the first man to master perpetual motion.

"Ok, you can cum, now..."

It is obvious to me once again why they call Barbra "the loudest lay on the Lower East Side," and it is equally apparent that Michael has no idea that he is not the only man to ever make Barbra "scream like a wild banshee woman." I see no harm in allowing him to go on believing such, since it goes without saying that Barbra is not faking any of the multiple orgasms she is presently having.

"Oh God," they both exclaim.

"Barbra. Michael. What are you doing? What's the matter? Why are you both getting up in such a hurry? This is not a one night stand. I demand that you lie for at least an hour in each other's arms."

"The condom broke!"

Chapter Ten

Per my request the English poet Robert Browning arrives in my hotel room (right on time) with his wife, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The English poet Percy Shelley, who drowned in 1882 while endeavoring to sail from Leghorn to La Spezia, Italy, during a storm, arrives with his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*. The Shelley's are only a few minutes late for the dinner the five of us are having in my room. Going to a restaurant is unthinkable. I would feel foolish ordering five plates of food, but far more so when seen speaking to my invisible companions. Then of course there would be the impossible problem of trying to draw attention away from the fact that food, cutlery, cups, saucers and napkins would be lifted up into the air. For such reasons we decided to stay in and order our dinner from room service. "Better to bewilder one bellhop than to baffle an entire restaurant," I tell my guests.

The bellhop is both bewildered and baffled when he delivers four extra meals. "My guests

haven't arrived yet," is my admittedly lame excuse, and I can tell by the puzzled expression on his face that he is wondering why I didn't wait until they had arrived before I ordered their dinners? He does not express his concern, however, and for that I am thankful. Though while he was pushing the meal cart into the room he ran right into one of the ghosts and I released my concern by exclaiming, "Watch out," and for that faux pas I am duly embarrassed all during the course of our otherwise delightful dinner. Undoubtedly the bellhop wondered what he was supposed to "watch out" for since there was nothing apparent in his path. To smooth over the situation some and to help him forget about my seemingly strange behavior I gave him an extra fifty dollars on top of his regular tip. "I won't be surprised if room service sends up a straight jacket the next time I order something," I say to my ghostly guests, who are wasting no time devouring their pheasants and their french fried potatoes. An unusual combination, but it was the meal of their choice. A vegetarian myself, I make do with a salad and some spinach linguine.

After desert, pie a la mode, I am impatient for my guests to leave. Barbra informed me earlier in the day that she is pregnant. "I missed my period, so I took a home pregnancy test. It was positive," she told me. I was not surprised, but the matter has been on my mind ever since. If I don't get her married soon she will be showing and the proverbial phrase "blossoming bride" will have a far more profound meaning.

"Good-night," I call to my guests, as they leave through the ceiling. There is a party in the room above that has been going on all evening, so the Shelley's and the Browning's have gone to mingle (invisibly of course) with the female movie star staying at the hotel and her very visible guests.

"Both of you sit down," I say to Barbra and Michael. "We can still salvage the story. The condom breaking was an accident. One that not even I had any control over or could have foreseen. Since you're not showing what the readers don't know won't hurt them. You can still, for all appearance's sake, be the perfect bride and groom."

I realize that this book is becoming too much like a real life drama not a romance novel, and furthermore I am having nearly no say whatsoever in the story line. It would seem that Barbra and Michael are writing for themselves their own romance, so how can I call myself the author of this novel when I am nothing more than their correspondent? I am pleased to learn, however, that I still have a certain amount of power over my protagonists, which I presently put into play.

"Get down on your knees and propose."

Michael, remarkably remaining in character, does as he is told. "Barbra, will you marry me?"

"Yes, Michael," Barbra replies with a radiant look on her face, and though I would have liked for her to be "a blushing bride" it was not meant to be.

"It will be a church wedding," I tell the happy couple. "You will wear a white wedding dress, Barbra. The most beautiful gown that Michael's money can buy in a chic Manhattan boutique."

"But..." she begins to protest, probably because she would prefer to wear PVC body suit, a rubber mini skirt, or some skintight black leather outfit.

"Barbra, get on the phone right now and call your parents in Brooklyn."

"What for?"

"I want you to invite them to the wedding. And Michael, you phone your father."

"When is the wedding going to be?" Barbra asks, as she picks up the phone.

"One week from today. Next Saturday at three o'clock in the afternoon."

"What about a honeymoon?" Michael inquires.

"I will leave that up to the two of you. Where do you want to go?"

"It doesn't matter to me. Wherever Barbra wants?"

"Barbra?"

"Niagara Falls, Canada."

"Niagara Falls? Nobody goes to Niagara Falls anymore. Why don't you pick some place tropical like the Virgin Islands in the Caribbean? Or at the very least you could go to Los Vegas?"

"It's my honeymoon and I want to go to Niagara Falls," she states willfully. "Hi, mama. It's Barbra. I'm calling to tell you I'm getting married. Next Saturday. Yes, to Michael. I want you and papa to come. Ok, I'll let you know."

"Tell them we'll send a limousine to pick them up in Brooklyn."

"A limo will come to pick you up. A limousine. It's just a big long car."

"Are they coming?" I ask when she has hung up the phone.

"She said they would."

"Good. I'll make all the necessary arrangements. You're going to be married in St. Patrick's Cathedral. Michael, you can get the marriage licence. I'll reserve a honeymoon suite for the two of you in Niagara Falls, far be it for me to stand in the way of true romance, and..."

My writing is interrupted by the arrival of more ghosts. I can feel their presence behind me, as they enter into my room unannounced, but as always they are more than welcome to come and go whenever they wish. On occasion I've tried hanging a do-not-disturb sign on my door when I wanted to work without interruption, but it was a useless gesture on my behalf, because the ghosts obliged to see the sign ignored it, while those that came through the wall, or the window, or the ceiling, or the floor, never saw it. Turning around I have the privilege of pronouncing the preeminent presence of the English poet William Blake. The American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. John Keats, also an English poet; and then finally the fourth entity in my room Lord Byron. The latter, another English poet, asks, "Have the Brownings and the Shelley's left?"

"They went up to the room directly above, Lord Byron. There's a party going on." Pointing in a perpendicular direction with my finger I watch the four masters of English verse vacate my room by rising through the ceiling. Shaking my head in amazement I return to Barbra's apartment where I find my protagonists entangled in a tearful fight.

"What's going on? I'm gone for only a few minutes and you're arguing. Why couldn't you fight when I wanted you to? What's the matter? Why is Barbra crying?" I ask Michael, who was on his way out the door when I made my timely arrival, for a moment later and he would have been gone.

"The wedding's off," he growls.

"Why?"

"Ask your heroine," he hollers.

Barbra has begun to bawl and it is her uncontrollable blubbering that makes any kind of coherent communication nearly impossible. "He doesn't want to marry me," she somehow manages to say in the midst of her mourning. "Some hero he is. He, he..." she snuffles.

"He what?"

"He thinks I'm a, a, a... a whore."

"Oh, oh," I say to myself, just as Michael bolts out of the apartment slamming the door behind him in disgust.

"Calm down, and tell me what happened?"

Barbra blows her prominent nose and she tries in vain to wipe the tears from her eyes, for like

two broken faucets they continue to flow. "Well, I thought, I should tell him the truth, so, so, so I did."

"The truth about what?" I demand to know.

"I told him I wasn't a virgin."

"That's not so bad."

"I also told him I was a prostitute."

"I see."

"He was shocked."

When another group of ghosts come into my room I am forced to leave my heroine alone in her moment of misery. "Barbra, I'll be right back."

Spinning around impatiently, I shout, "Upstairs."

I am stunned to see standing before me the English poet John Milton, the author of such masterpieces as *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Mr. Milton is accompanied by Christopher Marlowe, the playwright and poet. Standing between these two magnificent men is none other than William Shakespeare himself, who needs no introduction; and before I can utter another word the ghosts have gone through the ceiling, where no doubt they will remain at the party already full of poets. "You idiot," I say to myself with a chastising tone, for I can't believe that I was stupid enough to have sent the one and only William Shakespeare away. Having never met the man my mind is immediately wrought with regret. How could I let his ghost get away?

Surely, this very minute, I would throw myself in front of a subway train, take a handful of sleeping pills, or jump from the roof of the Waldorf=Astoria, just to become a ghost myself capable of chasing after Shakespeare. A sudden thought occurs to me that causes me to laugh out loud, even though it is far from amusing. It occurred to me as follows: "Who am I fooling? I could never follow in his footsteps." Nevertheless, if it had not been for my curiosity to find out what happened between Barbra and Michael, my abhorrence of dying and leaving an unfinished manuscript behind, and my fear of heights I might be plummeting towards the pavement this very minute.

"He said if I was a whore he didn't want anything more to do with me, ever again."

"Did he mention the baby?"

"He said for all he cared I could have an abortion. He said it probably wasn't his baby to begin with."

"Don't worry, I'll find somebody else for you. And if you want you can have an abortion."

"I don't want anybody else. I want Michael and I want his baby. I love him. You have to help me. You promised nothing bad was going to happen to me. You said there would be a happy ending. Well I'm miserable and heartbroken and pregnant and alone."

"It's not over yet," I tell her. "There's still hope for a happy ending."

"You swore it wasn't going to be a gothic romance. Well how much more gothic could it get?" she wails.

"It could get a great deal more gothic, but I promise you it won't. Now, you wait here. I'm going to see Michael. Where does he live?"

"I've only been to his house once. It's a brownstone on Park Avenue. His address is by the phone."

Michael's house is like many of the other brownstones on the block. The house, the Ferrari, five million dollars in liquidatable assets, and the position of vice-president were given to him by his father upon graduating from Harvard. I ring the door bell and Ludwig lets me in. He is tall,

awkward looking, and in his late forties. He speaks with a British accent, like a good butler should, and he has round beady eyes like any character who is supposed to be sinister should, or like "the butler who did it."

"Tell Mr. Burrows that J.C. Clover-Cook is here to see him."

"I was told by Mr. Burrows that he is not to be disturbed."

"He's already disturbed."

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Burrows is not receiving visitors."

"You tell him that I'm here and that I'm not leaving until he speaks with me. Do you understand?"

Ludwig lets me into the entranceway where he wishes for me to wait, and Michael, as stubborn as he apparently is, makes me wait for forty five minutes. When he finally agrees to see me Ludwig leads me into the library. Michael is sitting by the fireplace drinking a dry martini. He acquiescingly offers me a drink, which I readily refuse. Instead, I belligerently begin: "Listen to me, you heathen, my heroine is heartbroken and it's all your fault. Now, no matter what I have to have a happy ending. You must marry her and I will not take no for an answer."

"I'm not walking down the aisle or off into any symbolic sunset with that slut!"

"The book won't sell if you don't. You have to call her, you crumb. She's at home crying her eyes out. What are you trying to do, ruin my career? You're breaking the girls heart. First you take away her virginity and then you get her pregnant and now you've got the nerve to..."

"That broad was no virgin."

"She was for all intent and purposes. This is a fiction novel after all. Besides, if she hadn't told you, you would never have found out, and that is just one example of her fine character."

"She also told me she was a street prostitute and I want nothing more to do with her."

"How can you be so cold?"

"I'm rich. It's real easy."

"What about your son?"

"My what?"

"She's going to give you a boy. His will be named Michael Junior."

He shakes his head stubbornly and in disbelief. "She was a whore."

"So what? You love her, don't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"And she loves you and she's not a whore anymore, so what difference does it make what she did before she met you?"

"I suppose you're right. There is something special about her," he says whimsically, yet he quickly becomes cold and bitter again, as though some dark cloud from his subconscious is hanging over his head making it hard for him to see clearly. "You know what they say once a whore always a whore," he snarls.

"Like your mother," I snarl right back, for I could tell by his tone of voice and temperament that it was time for me to bring out the heavy artillery or to play what is commonly called "my trump card."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know precisely what I'm talking about. How would you like me to reveal to my readers, to the entire world, that you're not the son of the Burrows. Evelyn Burrows could not have children. She was as barren as a writer's block. And you, sir, are an illegitimate bastard who's origin is partially unknown. You were not born into the upper echelon of Manhattan. You were

born in the outskirts of Albany, New York. You're unwed mother was a twenty dollar whore who got pregnant and instead of getting an abortion, or giving you up for adoption, the sick bitch went into the woods and gave birth to you by a fallen down tree. Without even so much as looking at you she left you there to die from exposure and starvation. You were destined to be dinner for a pack of hungry wolves. And your unknown father, at best, was a twenty dollar trick, and at worse, a drunken old sailor without twenty dollars to his name whom your nymphomaniac mother did for free!"

"It's a lie. It's a lie. It's all a lie."

"It isn't and you know it."

"You're making this up. Stop it."

"It's the truth. If it wasn't for the woodsman who came along and found you you would have died before the end of the day. Fortunately he took you home. He rescued you from the fate that your cheap, slut, whore mother mercilessly abandoned you to. And the truth be known the woodsman and his wife didn't want you either. His wife was less than thrilled to say the least of her husband's findings. 'We can't afford to feed ourselves,' she said the second she saw your filthy, bloody, little body, so she and the woodsman dumped you off at an orphanage where you spent the first five years of your miserable life. If the Burrows, driving through the country one day in their stretched limousine, hadn't decided to drop into the orphanage you would have stayed there indefinitely in unwanted despair. As it was they bought you for fifty thousand dollars and took you back to Manhattan much the same way they purchased hordes of other possessions."

"Why, why are you telling me this?"

"To you remind you, Michael, that you have humble beginnings and not to judge anybody else. Don't look down on people less fortunate than yourself. You were deserted and unloved, so don't desert the only woman you have ever loved just because on the outside she may remind you of the things you've heard over the years about your mother, but on the inside I can assure you that they are nothing alike."

Once again a gathering of ghosts come into my room and I am presently so swamped with poets that I am forced to leave Michael's brownstone before finishing our conversation. Yet, before I turn away from my computer, to greet my newly arrived guests, I notice that Michael has calmed down considerably and just prior to my leaving I happen to overhear him on the phone saying, "Lovenstein, will you marry me?" Since I am almost certain that Barbra said, "Yes," I decide it is unnecessary for me to return to her flat for further verification of her acceptance - leaving me at liberty to greet, in good fashion, my guests. And in doing so I find myself gazing at the likes of Geoffrey Chaucer, the English poet and author of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Here too is Hart Crane, the American poet, who drank himself to the edge of insanity; and on a boat bound for New York City he leapt overboard and presumably drowned. Later I will ask him if indeed he did and why?

The Irish poet and dramatist William Butler Yeats, who perished in France is conversing in one corner of my room; the winner of the Nobel Prize in 1923, wearing dark rimmed reading glasses, is talking with:

William Wordsworth, the English romantic poet, whom I may later ask for some advice in writing a sonnet for my lovers Barbra and Michael.

Robert Lowell, an American poet and the author of the Pulitzer Prize winning poem "Lord Weary's Castle" can be seen smoking a cigarette while conferring with:

Another Robert, whose surname is Frost. He is also an American poet, and four time winner

of the Pulitzer Prize. At present he is looking, like myself, in the direction of:

The legendary Dylan Thomas, another alcoholic and another poet, but a Welsh one noted for the readings of his own verse.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, is yet another English poet in the room that I am dying to meet, but at the moment I am talking with:

Ezra Pound, an American avant-garde poet, who is more interested in having an animated argument with:

The English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, about Mr. Coleridge's use of opium to ease the pain of his rheumatism and about his symbolic poem "Kubla Khan."

Tying his shoelace is T.S. Eliot, an American born English poet and dramatist, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. Author of one of the most widely discussed literary works of the early 20th century it is this poem entitled "The Waste Land" that he is now discussing with:

Ralph Waldo Emerson, another American poet, who is presently looking my way.

Without purposely trying to impinge the pun "poetry in motion" upon the refined sensibilities of my readership I must mention that the words do come to mind, as I watch the numerous ghostwriters moving to and fro. There are, in fact, so many writers in my hotel room that I do not notice for the longest time Alexander Pushkin, the Russian poet, playwright, and novelist, but he is here just the same, as are the rest of the ghosts that came earlier in the evening. They have all returned. The Shelley's and the Brownings... The party upstairs is over. The movie star has gone to bed. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Lord Byron both tell me that she has to be on the set by sunrise.

For the few remaining hours of the evening the American alcoholic and drug addict Edgar Allan Poe reads to us select passages from "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Fall of the House of the Usher," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and my personal favorite, his riveting poem "The Raven." Then across the room, under the window, and in the early hours of the morning, I am delighted to see once again the ghost of Shakespeare sitting on the floor discussing Dante's Divine Comedy with none other than the author himself.

Dante, the Italian poet, who has been haunting the world for over six centuries since his death, smiles and says, "J.C., join us." Obviously, I am predisposed to do just that, though I realize, while rising to my feet, the only way that I can truly join them would be to jump off the roof of the Waldorf=Astoria. At this very moment it would not take an incurable disease like cancer or a bad case of melancholia to convince me to end my life. No my desire to be a ghostwriter, to follow in their footsteps, to mingle amongst the writers of yesteryears, is more than enough reason for me to actually take the plunge, but... "Before you can do anything as foolish as take your own life you have a book to finish," my writing muse says to me most earnestly.

Chapter Eleven

"Will you be mine, Lovenstein?"

"For an eternity of tomorrows, Mr. Burrows."

It would appear that I am not a poet, for (as you can plainly see) my plans of writing Barbra and Michael's wedding vows in verse were a veritable disaster. The important thing to remember

for the remainder of this romance novel is that Barbra and Michael are man and wife. The wedding was a success and at the moment they are on their honeymoon, happily married, in Niagara Falls, Canada.

It is a beautiful morning in New York City. The weather is what every summer day should be. I am expecting Jane to drop by at any given time. The Bronte sisters, Emily and Charlotte, were here earlier, but regrettably they had to go. I have gone down to the lobby to pay an outstanding hotel bill. The morning manager frowns from behind the front desk when he sees the amount owing for alcoholic beverages and food. He double checks the figures only to find that the computer was correct the first time. It is outlandishly high, to say the least, and surprising I'm sure to some of the staff here at the Waldorf=Astoria, since no one has ever seen any of my guests coming or going. Except for my ghostwriter friends and the occasional get together I have with my agent, Mr. Morris, I very rarely have visitors. I seldom see anyone on a social level. I am a loner in the literary world. Reclusive and really only happy when at work with my writing. In regards to my hotel bill it might be an appropriate time to mention that ghosts can eat, so don't let anyone tell you differently. They generally gobble up every morsel of food given to them. All the ghosts I know, with a few exceptions, have a voracious appetite. A scrap of food left on a ghost's plate is unheard of in my hotel room.

After putting my financial affairs in order I leave the front desk and I am on my way back to my room when I bump, not literally of course, into Jane. I am coming out of the elevator on the twenty seventh floor when I see her shapely figure floating down the hall. "Jane," I call out, just as she is about to enter my room.

"Oh, hello," she says with a turn of her head and then she waits for me in the hall.

"I heard you had a party the other night?" she says, while I unlock the door to my room.

"The Browning's and the Shelley's came for dinner and then afterwards they went to a party," I inform her upon entering, and while pointing towards the ceiling I say, "The party was in the room above, but a whole procession of poets popped in here on their way. When the party was over they all came back. It was rather an impromptu gathering of ghosts that had no where else to go. Don't worry, you didn't miss anything. There was no dancing. We just sat around reading poetry. Emily Dickinson was a late comer and surprisingly she was the most outgoing of the ghosts. She also asked about you several times."

"How is she?"

"In good spirits. She certainly wasn't as shy as she was the last time I saw her. Shakespeare told me that earlier in the evening she had been the life of the party up above."

"Bravo for her," Jane says. "By the way, how are Barbra and Michael doing? Are they back together?"

"They're married."

"Bravo for them as well."

"Yes, they're on their honeymoon."

"For how long?" Jane asks.

"Two weeks. They'll be back at the end of the month."

"Are they enjoying themselves?" she inquires.

"I suppose so. I haven't seen them. They drove there right after the wedding and since then I haven't done any work on the novel."

"Another writer's block?"

"No, nothing like that. I've been catching up on some reading. I was planning on returning to

work today."

"Why don't you? I'm curious to find out how they're getting along?"

"Right now? What are you going to do?"

"I can amuse myself. I might take a short nap if you don't mind?"

"Up all night again?"

"I went to a nightclub in Soho and then I roamed around the Random House Building until early this morning. I must admit it always makes me envious seeing all those manuscripts in preparation to be published and read by the public. It brought back such glorious memories. It made me wish I were a writer again."

"You are a writer, Jane," I say to her, and then motivated by her suggestion to see how Barbra and Michael are doing I sit down at my writing table, where in a moments time I transport myself to Niagara Falls, Canada.

The great waterfall itself is the first thing I or anyone going to the town of Niagara Falls would notice. The American Falls on the U.S. side is not as spectacular, and furthermore, I am informed by a tour guide that it is falling apart. Barbra and Michael drove across the Rainbow Bridge, so I feel that I must take the same route to get, to what the Canadians call, the Horseshoe Falls, named so because it is shaped like a horseshoe. The Niagara river races by and below me as I cross over the Rainbow Bridge. I know enough about the town and about Barbra and Michael's trip to tell you that two days after arriving here the honeymooners had seen all there was to see. They took the "Maid of the Mist" boat excursion. Raincoats with protective hoods were provided prior to their boarding the boat, so my happy couple did not get wet when the boat passed directly in front of the American Falls to a place called "The Cave of the Winds." Following this the boat moved as close as it could to the foot of the Horseshoe Falls. After leaving the boat they took an elevator down 125 feet and then they walked through the underground tunnels that lead to viewing portals behind the cascading water. Standing on the outdoor observation platform they held hands, hugged, and kissed, while the river, right over their heads, drowned out any smacking sound their lips might have made. Later they went to the top of the Skylon Tower, which stands 775 feet above the base of the falls. A glass enclosed elevator took them to the top where they dined in the revolving restaurant. After a candlelit dinner they walked along the river. But looking down into the gorge at the edge of the rapids, Michael, who can't swim, became nauseous and he vomited his veal cutlet over the railing. The whirlpool of water was too much for him (a hydrophobic) to digest, on what had been, a full stomach. They returned to their hotel (a block away from the falls) where they spent the night making love on a water bed, oddly enough, and then again in a heart shaped Jacuzzi. I travel along Main Street, like they also did the day they arrived, but unlike the newlyweds I do not go into the Haunted House or the House of Frankenstein or to any one of the Wax Museums. I am not a tourist here on vacation. I am here to work and I wonder, as I approach their room, why there is no do-not-disturb sign on the newlyweds door. I knock before entering, nevertheless, and not long after I'm let in I learn the reason for their being no sign on their door. Barbra is alone, which seems odd to me, for it is after midnight. Before I inquire about Michael's absence I pause to study their bridal suite, but even with all it's amenities it is not as luxurious as my room at the Waldorf=Astoria. "Where's Michael?" I ask.

"He's out having a few drinks with some people he met," she tells me lightly. "Can I get you a drink or something?" she asks.

"No, I'm fine, thanks. I can't stay long. I just wanted to see how the two of you are getting

along. Mainly I'm here to let my readers know that you're having a wonderful time."

"Our first few days were very romantic, but Michael becomes bored easily and I haven't been feeling well."

"What's the matter?"

"Morning sickness," she replies, as she sits down wearily on the edge of a lime green sofa. Now that I'm motivated to look at her abdomen I see, in spite of the loose fitting terry cloth bathrobe she is wearing, that her stomach is starting to swell. I am glad to report that Michael Junior is growing healthily inside of my heroine.

"You look tired. You should go back to bed. I've got to go anyway, but before I do I'd like to congratulate you on how well you carried yourself at the wedding. Your presence made it bearable to sit through that tiresome ceremony. You were truly a beautiful bride, and I compliment you on your choice of a wedding gown. It was gorgeous. Congratulations, and give my regards to Michael."

When I get back to New York City Jane is sleeping on my bed and it may interest some of you to know that Ms. Austen snores. Turning off my computer I tip toe into the bathroom to wash my face. The water falling from the faucet reminds me of the Niagara river, though the noise made by the former is not to be compared to the noise of the latter. I make enough noise in the bathroom, however, to awaken Jane. "Feeling better?" I ask when I see her sitting up on the bed.

"Much," she replies with a yawn. "How long did I sleep?"

"A couple of hours."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"What for? I was writing and you looked so peaceful."

"How are the honeymooners?"

"Michael was out, and Barbra hasn't been feeling well. Morning sickness."

"It will pass. Meanwhile, lets you and me get out of this hotel room. It's too beautiful a day to waste indoors," Jane says.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know. Anywhere. I know you and I bet you haven't been out since you started the book. You'll become stagnant if you don't start getting some fresh air. I used to go for walks all the time when I was alive. Being cooped up in a hotel is unhealthy."

"Jane, I just went to Niagara Falls, Canada."

While taking the elevator together down to the lobby I am very careful not to talk with Jane, even though she goads me to reply to a series of frivolous questions in front of several hotel guests. She even goes so far as to tickle my side. "You're incorrigible," I tell her in the lobby. "People already think I'm crazy. Last week one of the maids asked me if I did drugs and was prone to hallucinations." Jane laughs, like I knew she would, and we leave the Waldorf=Astoria, via the Lexington Avenue exit. Walking along 48th Street to Madison Avenue we make a left turn and traverse as far as Grand Central Station. Jane is determined to go inside. "I like to be around lots of living people," she explains, so I am forced to succumb and soon find myself surrounded by a throng of commuters both coming and going. It pains me to see so many homeless people parading around the station as well, all with no place in particular to go. But, standing in the center of Grand Central Station, I quickly become impatient. It is fine for Jane. People can pass right through her, where as I am constantly moving to and fro to keep from getting pushed and shoved and bumped into by the people swarming every square inch of the station.

"Oh, look," Jane cries, "there's Charles Dickens."

"Who?" I ask irritably.

"Charles Dickens," she repeats.

"Where?"

"Across the terminal," she tells me, so I look, but I can see no one even remotely resembling the writer in question.

"Wait here, I'll go get him." She moves effortlessly forward through an array of oncoming commuters, while I am jostled in the opposite direction by the ever changing crowd. To avoid getting trampled on I allow myself to be taken twenty or thirty feet afar. Finding myself relatively removed from the stampede I look up and I am startled to see Jane Austen and Charles Dickens hovering hand in hand. "Over here," I shout to the pair, and then they proceed to literally walk towards me on the heads of the people. I am compelled to laugh. Who better than Jane Austen and Charles Dickens to embody the expression "above the crowd." When they are only a few feet away from where I am standing they lower themselves simultaneously to my level, which in terms of literary standing is far lower than the floor. Facing one of the most famous novelists of all time I am filled with Great Expectations of my own about meeting: "Mr. Dickens, how do you do?"

"This is J.C. Clover-Cook," Jane says. "Charles is going to join us on our excursion."

When the three of us leave Grand Central Station we stroll over as far as Fifth Avenue, and stopping for no particular reason in front of a book store I tell my two companions that while we're here I would like to pick up some writing supplies.

"Go ahead, we'll wait outside," Jane says.

I am obliged to browse in the bookstore for no more than a minute since Jane and Mr. Dickens are awaiting my return, but when I stop in the alphabetically arranged "D" section one book in particular, which I just recently read, catches my eye. It is called Crime and Punishment. For no apparent reason I reach for the book just as it falls from the shelf and onto the floor. Naturally I bend down to retrieve it, when it suddenly slides across the linoleum and away from me. There is no doubt in my mind that Jane followed me inside and is somewhere in the vicinity playing an invisible practical joke. Bent over I find myself following the book, as it inches forever away from me and my grasp. Ready to give up I make one more futile attempt to retrieve the paperback when I see that it has ceased moving of its own volition by a pair of feet that are obviously those of a ghost. The shoes do not, however, belong to Jane, nor are they the shoes that Mr. Dickens was wearing. Taking hold of the book (at last) I straighten myself up to see standing before me the bearded ghost of Fyodor Dostoevsky, author of the novel I am holding; he died in St. Petersburg in 1881 it says on the back of the book in my hand. "Hello, Mr. Dostoevsky," I say diffidently.

"Jane, look who I found in the book store."

"Fyodor," she exclaims. "How marvelous. The more the merrier. Let's all go to Soho," she suggests slipping an arm under each of the ghosts. "Hail us a cab, J.C.," Jane says.

After several failed attempts to get us a cab Jane sticks her fore finger and her thumb in her mouth and whistles with an unearthly shrillness. Later I would think to myself that it was so loud that in all likelihood every cab driver in the city looked over his or her shoulder to see who wanted the taxi. With a ghost on either side of me I get into the back of the cab rather smugly since the cab driver believes it is I who can whistle so well.

"Tell the cabby you changed your mind and you only want to go as far as Christopher Street,"

Jane, who is sitting up front with the driver, says when we are less than halfway across town. "I don't know if I ever mentioned it before, but I marched along Christopher Street with the gays right after the Stonewall riot in 1968," she adds.

"I was only a baby," I tell her and then I tell the cab driver to take me somewhat short of Soho.

"We were all only babies at one time," the driver comments, so hereafter I am determined to remain silent and I manage to do so, until Mr. Dostoevsky has a small seizure sitting beside me and I am forced to speak out loud for Jane's assistance, since Mr. Dickens, on my left, does not know what to do. Later, in a Soho coffee shop, Mr. Dostoevsky tells me that the stress of being sentenced to four years of hard labor in Siberia brought on epilepsy, and he suffered with the illness for the rest of his life. "That's terrible," I exclaim.

"What is?" the waiter wants to know, assuming there is something the matter with my cappuccino.

"I was sentenced to be executed until at the last moment they reprieved my sentence and my punishment was changed to penal exile," Mr. Dostoevsky explains.

"What for?" I whisper, unaware that the people at the adjoining table are not only near enough to hear they are inclined to listen closely.

"For reading and debating French socialist theories, which were forbidden to be openly discussed in czarist Russia."

"Well New York City in the 1990's may be a combat zone full of barbarians, but at least it's disintegrating somewhat democratically," I declare.

"Amen," Jane says, and then while paying the bill I become painfully aware that the other patrons were listening and are now subjecting me to a series of stares. Knowing myself to be as sane as anyone else in the cafe and caring little about their opinion of me, I, along with my invisible friends, leave feeling fully vindicated. We are half a block away before I realize another of Mr. Dostoevsky's novels, the last he wrote before his death, *The Brother's Karamazov*, which I purchased in the book store, is not on my person. Being that I am apprehensive about going back into the cafe Jane offers to fetch it for me, and I can only imagine the expression on the patron's faces when they saw the paperback float out the door that opened and closed of its own accord.

Shortly hereafter we are standing on the sidewalk on Broadway Avenue unable to make up our minds about what to do, until it begins to rain. It is only a light drizzle, but that is all it takes for a decision to be readily made. Ghosts do not like to be rained on. "It runs right through us," they complain, so I hail cab of my own accord and I am about to get into the back when I see it is already occupied. "Anton," Mr. Dostoevsky, who is standing beside me, cries.

Jane sits up front with Charles Dickens between her and the unsuspecting driver, though he does mention a chill. I am in the back seat between Mr. Dostoevsky and Anton Chekhov, the author of such splendid plays as *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Sea Gull*. It seems the Russian dramatist has never been to New York until today. He tells us that he has been sightseeing in the back of the taxi.

"You wouldn't believe some of the characters that have come and gone in this cab since early this morning."

Forgetting once again that my ghostly friends are invisible to everyone but me, I say to Mr. Chekhov, "New York is a great city for a writer. It's filled with colorful characters. Though we were just discussing how much the city has degenerated. The whole country's falling apart. Kids are doing crack cocaine. Jane, were you at the hotel when Gertrude Stein was talking about "The

Lost Generation" of today?"

"No, I don't believe I was," Jane says.

"Either was I, buddy. Who the hell are you talking to?" The cab driver demands to know.

"Jane Austen," I rigidly reply.

"Jane, who?" he asks.

"Just take me to the Waldorf=Astoria," I answer and with the exception of muttering to himself something about my being a "nutcase" the driver does not interrupt our conversation any further for the remainder of the ride.

The Russian author Ivan Turgenev, and another Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, who wrote the novel Dead Souls, are waiting for us in the lobby. I don't know how they knew we were on our way back, or anything else. I do know that a bellhop and a day manager saw me smile to a potted plant, nod my head at a sofa, and wait, for no apparent reason, until all the ghosts got on "the empty elevator."

In my room I call down and tell room service to send up two bottles of Vodka, and some orange juice for myself, Jane, and Mr. Dickens, since only the Russian writers are accustomed to drinking their Vodka straight. The night is spent discussing politics until at last Charles Dickens lightens the mood by reciting for us from memory the first chapter of his novel, A Tale of Two Cities. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,..." he begins, but the rest of the chapter and the majority of the night remain a mystery to me, for I gave up the orange juice and began drinking my Vodka straight with the best of them as it were. The last thing I remember is staggering over to my computer and before I knew it I was back in Niagara Falls swirling around, so to speak, in the dangerously rough waters of my romance novel.

Barbra is sound asleep when Michael gets back from the bar. He is drunk. He yanks his clothes off carelessly and throws them on the floor. He gets into bed with reckless abandonment. Barbra rolls over onto her side. She woke up when Michael switched on the light, but she knows he's been drinking and she isn't feeling well, so she pretends to be sleeping. He grabs her aggressively from behind. She can smell whiskey on his breath as he breathes heavily on the nape of her neck. Lying in back of her he pushes his pelvis up against her rear end. "Michael, I'm not feeling well," she finally says, and by doing so she gives away the fact that she is not sleeping.

"That's what you said last night?"

"That's because I wasn't feeling well then either."

"Just give me a blow-job."

Barbra flatly refuses. Michael playfully pulls her shoulder, but Barbra passionately protests. She gets out of bed and goes into the bathroom. When she returns she snaps on the overhead light. "Michael," she says and she is mad, "just because we're married doesn't mean you can maul me whenever you want. It's three o'clock in the morning. Where were you all night? I was worried about you. We're on our honeymoon and you leave me sitting in this suite while you go out drinking with strangers. Then you come back here drunk and expect me to open up my legs and let you make love to me for a minute and a half when you know I'm not feeling well."

Michael has jumped out of bed by now. His face is contorted and red with rage. He shouts, "Don't tell me what to do. And don't you ever mouth off to me again, woman."

"I will if I want and don't call me woman," Barbra yells back. "I'm your wife..."

"You're my whore," and with that he struck her across the side of the face with the back of his hand, hard enough that his knuckles left behind a black and blue mark that remained there all throughout the following day. It took several more days before the swelling on that side of her

face subsided, and the bruise which had turned purple in color eventually went away as well, as bruises normally do, but no sooner did it disappear when it was replaced by another bruise, two black eyes, and a broken nose. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,... "It was the beginning of the beatings," Barbra Burrows, well on her way to becoming a battered bride, would confess to me much later.

Chapter Twelve

The phone ringing awakens me in the middle of a dream. It is morning, however, and the dream was of an extremely unpleasant nature, so I do not mind the interruption.

"Hi, J.C."

"Hi, yourself. How was the honeymoon?"

"It was a fucking nightmare," Barbra replies with a ghastly sounding voice. "I had the worst time of my life."

"Because of the morning sickness?"

"That had nothing to do with it," she says.

"How's Michael?"

"How is he? The question is what is he? But, whatever he is, he's at work and I was wondering if you would meet me for lunch today?"

"Sure," I reply. "When and where?"

"Noon?"

"No, that's too early. Voltaire is coming at eleven o'clock."

"Who?"

"Voltaire. He's a writer friend."

"I've never heard of him."

Determined to quickly change the subject I say, "How about two o'clock. We'll have a late lunch. Do you want me to come down there?"

"I no longer live on the Lower East Side. I moved into Michael's brownstone."

"Of course, I forgot. Why don't we meet at The Tavern on the Green at two o'clock. We can stroll through Central Park after we eat."

"Ok, but I have to get home before Michael, so that I can pack my bags."

"I'll see you then."

My pot of coffee and croissants arrive right on time as always, and after drinking two and a half cups of coffee I still have plenty of time to shower and get dressed before Voltaire arrives at eleven. The French writer, who died in Paris, May 30, 1778 sits down and soon subjects me to his brilliant and sarcastic wit. I learn the he was the leader of the Enlightenment and the forerunner of existentialism. "I was imprisoned in the Bastille twice for my writing," he tells me. "Let us crush the infamous one."

"Who?" I ask unknowingly.

"I am referring to any form of religion that persecutes nonadherents or that constitutes fanaticism. Woes are heaped upon the world in the name of religion."

"That's true," I state self-consciously. "According to the Bible woman are not equal to men and should be subservient and, ah, so forth."

"Literature," he continues, "should be useful and concerned with the problems of the day. We must act against intolerance, tyranny, and superstition. I believe in freedom of thought and respect for all individuals."

He goes on for an hour or more, filling my head with all kinds of philosophical notions and I am eager to listen longer until I remember my lunch date with Barbra. "I don't mean to rush you, but I'm running a little late."

"Do you even know what existentialism is?" he asks me.

"No, sir, I don't."

His laughter is acidulent. "It's a philosophical movement that stresses the individual's position as a self-determining agent responsible for his or her own actions."

"I see. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Voltaire. Inadvertently, you've been a tremendous help."

I meet my heroine for lunch like planned at The Tavern on the Green. I am a few minutes late. She is already seated at a table in a far off corner when I arrive. She smiles when she sees me, but I can tell that she is upset. She certainly sounded so on the phone. She is wearing dark sunglasses, which she does not remove when the waiter shows me to my seat, and even though we are sitting on the outdoor patio we are in the shade. She is wearing a great deal of make-up as well. Not since she was a hooker have I seen her wear so much rouge. Something is definitely wrong?

"Take off your sunglasses," I demand.

"Why?"

"I want the reader to see your face."

She lights a cigarette stubbornly. "Give me a minute," she says.

"Since when did you start smoking?"

"I know I shouldn't for the baby's well being, but it makes Michael mad, so I enjoy it."

When she finishes her cigarette she removes her sunglasses, hereby giving us the ability to observe that both of her eyes are black. My heart immediately goes out to her and I can't help wondering how many bruises, made by Michael, lie beneath the make-up? Having entirely lost my appetite I take to ordering a double martini. "Michael drinks martinis. They make me sick," Barbra says, "and so does Michael. I'll have a glass of milk for the sake of the baby, though under the circumstances I could certainly use a good stiff drink."

"How did it happen?" I ask, after our respective drinks have arrived.

"The first time?"

"Yes."

"It was the night you came to visit us in Niagara, Falls. When he came back from the bar he wanted to have sex, but I wasn't feeling well and he was drunk, so I wouldn't let him. He got mad and he slapped me."

"What did you do?"

"I was stunned. I had never seen him angry before. He was very apologetic afterwards, but I told him if he ever did it again I'd kill him. Everything was fine for a couple of days, and then he went out drinking again. This time he didn't get back to the hotel until after four in the morning. I was furious. I heard him cursing when he came in about how some "fucking dickhead" had deliberately dented his Ferrari. He went straight to bed and I pretended I was asleep. I even faked snoring, so much so I'm surprised Canadians didn't call me the loudest snore in Niagara Falls..." Her attempt at humor, however humorous it might have been, failed to make either one of us

laugh. "The next day I told him that I wanted to go back to New York and he flipped. His face changed dramatically. He became almost diabolical looking. Then he yelled, 'We're on our fucking honeymoon,' and then he hit me."

"What did you do?"

"I hit him back as hard as I could."

"What did he do?"

"He hit me even harder. Then I started to cry and he hit me harder still and the more I cried the harder he seemed to hit. The more submissiveness I showed the more domination he displayed and the more destructive he became. I tried to run, but he grabbed me before I could get away. I remember the terror I felt throughout the entire ordeal and for as long as I live I will never forget the horror of feeling his fist in my face over and over again. I wound up with a broken nose, a lacerated lip, and two black eyes. His almost broke my jaw. I was terrified. No matter what I did or said he wouldn't quit. I begged and pleaded with him to stop..." Barbra looks defiantly around the restaurant to make sure no one is listening. I urge her to go on. "Well, in a weird way it was as though he was hitting somebody else, because although he was staring at me with a hateful expression on his face, his eyes were vacant, as if he was trying to hurt someone or something else. Someone or something that he both loved and hated, or hated to love? I don't know."

"His mother, who abandoned him at birth, I would imagine."

"I think so too," Barbra says. "Anyway, he brought me a dozen red roses that afternoon and he was as sweet as can be. I told him to shove the roses up his ass."

There is absolutely no compassion in her eyes as she surveys her surroundings with a cold stare. "I'm going to leave him," she announces. "That's why I wanted to meet you for lunch. I'm moving back to Brooklyn, tomorrow. You can find yourself another heroine. I've had it."

I watch her lighting another cigarette and I wait until she has smoked the majority of it before I say, "No. You have to stay with Michael. You can't leave."

"Are you crazy? What in the world for? I'm not that type of woman. I won't take it."

"You have to for two reasons."

"There is no reason on earth good enough for me to stay."

"Voltaire, the writer friend of mine, said two things to me this morning that made me realize you have to remain in the marriage. Until then I was going to tell you myself to leave. I was planning on doing a major revision. If need be I was going to write Michael right out of the book. I even came up with some ideas about how to get rid of him in a macabre manner."

"Tell me about them," Barbra says.

"I thought about putting a stray bullet into the back of his head. I thought about forcing his Ferrari into a brick wall, where it would burst into flames with Michael trapped inside screaming as he slowly burned to death. I thought of several violent endings for Michael Burrows, the wife beater, but then Voltaire visited me this morning and two remarks he made made me realize why your romance is heading in such a disastrous direction. I now believe that not only is it meant to be, it is for the best."

"How long have you known about Michael's temper, for lack of a better word?" Barbra asks.

"I first suspected something when I went to see him at his brownstone. The night he broke off the wedding he was sitting in the library by the fireplace drinking a dry martini. I knew there was something malevolent about the man, but at the time I didn't know to what degree."

"You said there are two reasons why I must stay. What are they?"

"Voltaire said literature should be useful and concerned with the problems of the day."

"I don't understand?"

"I didn't either at the time, but it's one reason why I want you to remain with Michael and why I want you to allow him to beat you - to a pulp."

"Why?"

"For women all around the world. We are going to show them what existentialism is."

"I suggest you show me first, for I have no idea what it is."

"It's the second thing that Voltaire told me. It's a philosophical movement of the twentieth century which stresses the individual's position as a self-determining agent responsible for his or her own actions."

"Good, because that's why I'm leaving. I'm responsible for myself and my actions and I will not let any man get away with beating me."

"But, you must."

"You must be out of your mind. You want me to be a martyr for women worldwide? Well, I won't do it. You want me to let Michael go on hitting me whenever he's in the mood? I won't do it."

"That is exactly what I want, Mrs. Burrows. I want you to go on loving Michael Burrows, and by turning a blind eye to the beatings..."

"Don't you mean a black eye?"

"...you will, from this moment forward, play the part of the battered bride."

"Wouldn't it be better if I just divorced him now to show women in similar situations that leaving their abusive husband, or boyfriend, is the right thing to do?"

"It's not what the women we want to reach do. They stay, sometimes for years, and so must you. That is what this book is about."

"I thought it was a romance novel?"

"In a way it still is," I tell her.

"A gothic romance," she replies bitterly.

"Yes, and you are about to become my imperiled heroine."

"But, it began as a regular romance."

"I'm sure all abusive relationships begin as regular romances until something goes wrong."

"Something went wrong all right," Barbra replies with even more bitterness in her voice than before. She puts her sunglasses back on and says, "You know, J.C., it's happened several more times since we got back from Niagara Falls. Right after I moved into his brownstone he began beating me and he's becoming more violent with each beating."

The terrifying turn my romance novel has taken causes me to shiver involuntarily. I sympathize with Barbra completely, but I'm simultaneously delighted. I motion for the waiter to bring me the bill. After signing my signature to pay for our drinks I scribble something on a napkin as well. It is a note to myself regarding a revision that I must make for the following chapter. Barbra Burrows, the battered bride, is obliged to forget that we ever had this conversation, and furthermore she is going to remain married to Michael Burrows.

Delighted, by my heroine's destiny to become an abused wife, I sip on my drink slowly and when I am finished I stand up. Then with one last look at the lady sitting across from me, I say, "It is your duty, Barbra Burrows, to literature, and to women the world over. Go home and I guarantee that before this book is done, if my writing muse lets me, Michael Burrows will have broken every bone in your body."

Chapter Thirteen

The phone ringing the following day awakens me in the midst of yet another dream. It is morning once again, but the dream was a particularly pleasant one, so today I do mind the interruption.

"Hi, J.C."

"Hi, yourself. How was the honeymoon?"

"It was fabulous," Barbra replies with a cheerful sounding voice. "I had the best time of my life."

"How is the morning sickness?"

"It's gone. I feel marvelous," she says.

"How's Michael?"

"He's wonderful. He's at work. I was wondering if you want to meet for lunch today?"

"Sure. When and where," I ask.

"Noon."

"No, that's too early. Lewis Carroll is coming at eleven o'clock."

"Who?"

"Lewis Carroll. A writer friend."

"I've never heard of him?"

I am reluctant to tell her that he is the author of Alice in Wonderland, and why wouldn't I be when nearly everyone is knowledgeable of the fact that he died in 1832. "How about two o'clock? We'll have a late lunch. Do you want me to come down there?"

"I no longer live on the Lower East Side. I moved into Michael's brownstone."

"Of course, I forgot. Well why don't we meet at The Tavern on the Green at two o'clock. We can stroll through Central Park afterwards."

"Ok, but I have to get home before Michael, so that I can make his dinner."

"Whatever you say, I'll see you then."

Lewis Carroll, the English author, arrives just in time to have coffee and croissants. We talk for a short while about my book and the disillusioned life that Barbra Burrows and women like her all over the world are living. We call them "Alice's in Wonderland." We laughingly compare Michael, my main character, to Mr. Carroll's Mad Hatter and White Knight. "Overnight he went from being a White Knight to a Mad Hatter," I tell Mr. Carroll with a chuckle, though in reality I find nothing amusing about my subject matter, namely Michael's bias for beating Barbra.

I finish dressing and I leave my hotel room not long after Lewis Carroll. Arriving at the restaurant early I am already sitting at a table when Barbra comes. Her voice is as cheerful sounding as it was earlier on the phone, but she is wearing dark sunglasses and a great deal of make-up. Her mannerisms give away the fact that she is exceedingly nervous. She does not remove the sunglasses when she sits down, even though it is a cloudy day. I take note that today she is wearing far more rouge than ever before.

"Take off the sunglasses," I order.

"Why?"

"I want the reader to see your face."

She lights a cigarette diffidently. "Give me a minute, ok?"

"Since when did you start smoking?"

"I know I shouldn't. It's bad for the baby and it makes Michael awfully angry, so I am going to quit as soon as I can."

When she takes off her sunglasses I am not at all surprised to see that both of her eyes are black. Just the same I pretend to be shocked. I begin to wonder just how many bruises, made by Michael, lie beneath the make-up? Having lost my appetite once again I order a double martini. "Martinis are Michael's favorite drink and mine too, but I'll have a glass of milk for the sake of the baby," Barbra says.

"How did it happen?" I ask after her milk and my martini have arrived.

"The first time?"

"Yes."

"It was the night you came to visit us in Niagara Falls. When he came back from the bar he wanted to have sex, but I wasn't feeling well and he was drunk, so I wouldn't let him. He got mad and he slapped me."

"What did you do?"

"To deserve it, you mean?"

"No, silly, after he hit you, what did you do?"

"I was stunned. I had never seen him angry before. But afterwards he was very apologetic, so I put the incident in the back of my mind. Everything was fine for a couple of days, and then he went out drinking again. This time he didn't get back to the hotel until almost four in the morning. I was frightened. He was cursing when he came in about somebody having deliberately put a dent in his Ferrari. He went right to bed and I pretended I was asleep, but the next day I asked him if he wanted to go back to New York and he flipped. His facial features altered drastically. He was downright diabolical looking. Then he yelled, 'We're on our f---ing honeymoon,' and then he hit me."

"What did you do, and I don't mean to deserve it, because no matter what you might have done you didn't deserve to be hit."

"I covered my face as quickly as I could."

"What did he do?"

"He hit me even harder. Then I began to cry and he hit me harder still, and the more I cried the harder he seemed to hit me. The more submissiveness I showed the more domination he displayed, and the more enraged and destructive he became. I tried to reason with him, but he was too far gone. I remember the terror I felt throughout the entire ordeal, and for as long as I live I will always remember the horror of feeling his fist in my face over and over again. I wound up with a broken nose, a lacerated lip, and two black eyes. He almost broke my jaw. I was terrified. No matter what I did or said he wouldn't quit. I begged and pleaded with him to stop..." Barbra looks shyly around the restaurant to make sure no one is listening. To get her to go on I have to prod her repeatedly with promises of: "It's all right." and "Trust me."

"Well, in a strange way it was as though he was hitting somebody else, because although he was staring at me with a hateful expression on his face, his eyes were vacant, as if he was trying to hurt someone or something else. Someone or something that he both loved and hated, or hated to love. I don't know."

"His mother who abandoned him a birth, I bet."

"I think so too," Barbra says. "Anyway, he bought me a dozen red roses. I realized that it was probably my fault that he got so angry, so I told him that all was forgiven."

As Barbra surveys her surroundings with a sad stare I am aghast to see that there is a great

deal of compassion for Michael in her eyes. "It was not your fault, and you have to leave him," I say.

"Leave him? I can't leave him."

"You have to," I cry. "He's a monster. You can't stay with him one more minute. Things will not get better on their own. Go home and make his supper? Why don't you just serve the devil his dinner? You're going home to pack your bags this instant."

Shaking her head rigorously, Barbra says, "I could never bring myself to leave him."

"You can and you will."

"I won't."

"Why not?"

"I love him. I forgave him and he's promised me it will never happen again."

"How gullible can you get?"

"Gullible?" she says and then she thinks to herself for a moment. "I guess maybe I am. And I suppose you're right, because when we got back to New York he moved me into his brownstone and he beat me again. It was far worse than before."

Shaking my head now I am at a loss for something helpful to say on the subject, so I ask, "How is the baby?"

"It's fine. He avoids hitting me in the stomach."

"So far," I reply.

"It's funny. It's as if he despises me and adores me at the same time. He's extremely jealous and possessive. The other day the next door neighbor came over to return some tools of Michael's that he'd borrowed. He was just leaving when Michael got home from work. After the guy was gone Michael demanded to know what the hell he was doing there. I told him the truth. I told him he was returning some tools, but Michael didn't believe me. He stomped up the stairs to his weight room. I knew while I was making his dinner that he was mad. When the souffle was ready I called to him from the kitchen, but he didn't answer. I sensed, as I went upstairs, that something was going to happen. I went into his weight room and he was doing bench presses. When he saw me in the doorway he dropped the weights on the floor. I told him dinner was ready and he started yelling about the next door neighbor. He asked me if I found the man attractive and I told him that I didn't. He accused me of having an affair. I started to leave the room, but he grabbed me and threw me down on the floor. He picked up one of his barbells and raised it over my head. He said he was going to crack my skull open. The phone rang and after a few rings he let me go. I ran across the hall and locked myself in the bathroom. He banged on the door several times. I was crouched in the bathtub crying. I was afraid he was going to kick the door down, but after awhile he went away. I could hear him talking on the phone. Whoever it was had left a message on the answering machine and Michael had phoned them back. I was too afraid to leave, so I just stayed in the tub. An hour or so later he returned. I made him promise through the door that he wouldn't hurt me, but the second I stepped out into the hallway he hit me. I started to cry uncontrollably. Then I guess he felt guilty, because he began crying as well. He got down on his knees and begged for my forgiveness. He told me how sorry he was several times."

"And was that the last time?"

"No, two days later he struck me so much force I fell to the kitchen floor unconscious. He didn't like the way I'd cooked his dinner. When I woke up I was lying in a pool of blood. I thought I had lost the baby, but it was from a cut on the back of my head. I couldn't move at first. I felt numb all over. I had to touch myself to make sure that I was still alive. I thought maybe I'd

died and gone to hell. Another time, either before or after that incident, I'm not sure which, I woke up lying on the living room floor unable to remember what had happened. All I know is there was another cut on the back of my head and that this time I knew I wasn't dead, but I wished that I were. Michael was upstairs skulking around in the bedroom. I can remember saying to myself that day, 'Kill me and get it over with.'"

"Was that the last time?"

"I think so."

"Leave him!" I exclaim vehemently.

"I love him."

"So what, leave him anyway."

"I don't think he hits me intentionally. He just can't control his temper. Plus, he always apologizes and he's always very ashamed of himself afterwards."

"So he should be," I state.

"But you see, I don't think he means to hurt me. He just gets mad and loses control. Then after he beats me he's as sweet as can be."

"Guilt."

She nods her head in agreement and then looks down at the table, as though she too is ashamed of something. I notice that she has barely touched her milk. "I love him with all my heart," she tells me unnecessarily.

"He has a sickness, Barbra, and you're not helping him get better by allowing him to beat you. You're perpetuating his illness."

"But, the beatings have stopped," she says.

"Maybe, for the time being."

"The last time he swore he wouldn't hit me anymore."

"But what if he does? And chances are he will. Are you going to forgive him again? Are you going to keep on forgiving him all the way to your grave? Are you a masochist?"

"Of course not."

"Does it turn you on when he hits you?"

"No, it scares the hell out of me."

"There are no good reasons to remain in a violent marriage. When you walked down the aisle you were not walking a gang plank into an early grave. When you vowed till death do you part, the priest was not making a pun on behalf of your life, nor was he giving your spouse permission to beat you to a pulp. When Michael asked, 'Will you be mine, Lovenstein?' your reply was not ravage me with blows and fill my life with woes, Mr. Burrows. There was nothing in your nuptial vows about your becoming a victim of violence. Holy matrimony does not give your husband the right to raise his hand to you, ever."

"I know you're right, J.C., but no matter what I still love him."

"That may be, but the fact is the man you are in love with has deep emotional problems. The man you are married to is... a maniac."

"I'm telling you, J.C., the beatings have stopped. I'm sure of it."

"Did it ever occur to you to call the police?"

She looks at me like I have lost my mind. "Of course not."

"Why?" I ask, though I already know what her answer will be.

"I love him," she says, and if I wasn't opposed to violence perhaps I would have punched her myself.

"If he ever hits you again I want you to have him arrested."

Shaking her head, she says, "No."

"You could get a restraining order against him. You could easily get a legal separation. Hell, I can give you a divorce in the next chapter and a hefty settlement. I can make sure that you'll never have to go back to working the streets if that's what you're worried about?"

"I'm not, and don't you dare do any of those things. I am madly in love with Michael Burrows and there is nothing you can say that will ever convince me otherwise. I could never bring myself to leave him. The beatings have stopped. It's been several days now since he hit me and I believe he meant it when he swore he wouldn't hit me anymore. We can put all of this in the past and start over. I'm sure of it."

The stubborn stance that my heroine is taking causes me to shiver in anticipation. Though I sympathize with her wholeheartedly, at the same time I am disgusted. I motion for the waiter to bring me the bill and after I sign my signature to pay for our beverages I scribble on a napkin a note to myself. Barbra Burrows is going to regret the consequences of her decision to remain in the marriage, but at the moment there seems to be nothing that I can do about it.

Disgusted, by her willingness to allow herself to be an abused wife, I fail to finish my drink. Instead I stand up and, with one last look at the lady sitting across from me, I say, "It is your duty, Barbra Burrows, to yourself, and to women the world over, to leave him right away. If you don't I can guarantee that before this book is finished, if you let him, Michael Burrows will have broken every bone in your body."

Chapter Fourteen

The beatings increased manyfold. They also became more violent in nature, and far more life threatening to Barbra and to her unborn baby. A barrage of verbal abuse began as well. Michael called her a whore and a bitch and a pig and a slut and... Every obscene adjective that he could think of she was subjected to time and time again. In a particularly bad mood one morning he struck her and then he pushed her down the stairs. Stomping down the stairs after her he planned on striking her again, but it was obvious, by the way she was lying on the living room floor at the foot of the stairs, that her leg was broken.

"I fell down a flight of stairs," she said to the doctor, the same doctor who sewed stitches into her forehead a few days before.

Michael, as always, apologized profusely to and from the hospital. Barbra, picking away at the plaster cast that covered the entire length of her leg, presumed it was safe under the circumstances to light a cigarette in his presence. "I told you to quit smoking," Michael snapped; and later that same evening, while trying to take away her last pack of cigarettes, he broke her arm by twisting it behind her back relentlessly. One week later, with her arm in a cast and a sling, Michael accidentally broke her other leg. It was an accident in so far as he did not want an invalid on his hands, for then who would he have to hit? It was deliberate enough, however, in so far as he purposely punched her in the face so hard that she staggered back and tumbled down the same set of stairs as before, and like before, by the time she landed in the living room her other leg was broken. Two days later, coming home from work early, he caught her smoking again, so he twisted her other arm behind her back until it too was broken. It being the only limb left on his wife that he could injure I can only assume that he had been unable to resist the temptation. By

now the doctor did not believe one word that came out of Barbra's mouth, but since she refused to press criminal charges there was little that he could do. His hands were hypothetically tied, and so had Barbra's hands been tied on more than one occasion. There was nothing hypothetical in her case, the doctor concluded, for he could tell by the rope burns on her wrists that she had been tied up for real, and by the rawness of the sores he would say she was tied tightly for an extended period of time.

"The cuts, bruises, abrasions, and broken bones, of Mrs. Burrows can not possibly be caused by "clumsiness" like she claims," the doctor wrote. And after confronting Mrs. Burrows one last time about "the beatings" he reported Michael to the police. "I don't care how rich your husband is. He's accountable for his actions," the doctor said to Barbra, yet she remained loyal, refused to file charges, and would not admit that Michael was to blame for any of her broken bones. Michael began taking her to another hospital, or to no hospital at all as was often the case. Broken bones had to be attended to by a physician, but cuts, bruises, and cracked ribs, could be taken care of at home. Barbra was not pleased when it became incumbent that she stop going to her pediatrician. It was during the eighth month of her pregnancy when she went for her last visit. This doctor was not only highly suspicious, but she was also adamant about having Michael arrested. "Mrs. Burrows, every time you let your husband hit you, you're jeopardizing the life of your baby." her doctor warned.

Barbra was home alone and confined to a wheelchair when she had her first contraction. She became dreadfully afraid, for although she was full-term and had been expecting to deliver any day, Michael was at work and his secretary had long ago been told never to take any phone calls from his "troublesome wife." Michael did not like for Barbra to phone him at work, not that she had ever done so on any occasion. When the contractions became close together Barbra was forced to summon the help of their nondescript, though extremely nice, next door neighbors. Mr. and Mrs. Ingleson pushed Barbra in her wheelchair to their station wagon, laid her down in the back as best as they could considering she was covered in plaster casts, and then they drove her to the nearest hospital. The Ingleson's, like everyone else in the area, knew that Barbra was married to a wife beater, though many, who knew Michael, were more inclined to call him "that piece of shit."

Barbra told her neighbors that it was unnecessary for them to stay, so subsequently, except for the staff, she was alone at the hospital. The labor lasted for eleven hours. Michael found her note at home, but he did not come to visit her until two days after the baby was born and even then he phoned beforehand to find out if it was a boy or a girl. Anybody observing his solicitous behavior when he finally did go to see her could never have suspected him to be anything but the most attentive husband and the proudest parent possible. For a while even Barbra believed that the birth of their baby might be the halcyon required to calm their stormy relationship. It was not. A nanny was hired, however, to help with the baby. Barbra could not walk, as both of her legs were still in casts, nor did she have the use of her arms, as they still remained in casts and slings. Ludwig had long since been let go. After Barbra moved into the brownstone all of his paid duties had been passed onto her. The cooking, the cleaning, and the constant care of Michael Burrows had become the duties of his diligent bride. Their baby was named Michael Junior. Though Barbra had wanted to name him after her father. He was recently diagnosed with having Alzheimer's disease, and his having died even more recently was her main reason for wanting to call their son Saul. Michael objected vehemently, so subsequently his son was christened, at the church where Barbra and Michael were married, Michael Bartholomew Burrows. Bartholomew,

being Michael Seniors middle name. Barbra was wheeled to the christening in her chair. She had not been able to go to her father's funeral, for Michael refused to take her. "I have an important meeting," he told her on the morning of her father's interment. Mrs. Lovenstein was livid. She had no idea about the abuse her daughter was undergoing. She had not seen either one of them since the wedding. Barbra did not want to worry her, so she let her mother go on believing that "my daughter has deserted me now that she's married to that rich man Michael Burrows." Furthermore, Mrs. Lovenstein, since the death of her demented husband, has been forced to live entirely off her old age security, because Barbra is no longer able to send her money at the end of each month, like she could when she was a self-employed self-supporting prostitute. Michael, her sole supporter now, will not give her or her mother any money.

On a more positive note Michael Junior did bring some joy back into their lives, but only for a short while. The novelty of his being there soon wore off and once that happened Michael reverted back to his pugnacious self. Barbra was thankful that Michael Junior looked very much like his father, because (more than once) before he was born Michael senior remarked, "We'll know when he's born if you've been screwing around behind my back." Then after he was born, and the blood test that Michael ordered confirmed the fact that he was the father, Michael had to make do with the following, "Just because he's my kid doesn't mean a damn thing. You could still be cheating on me." Barbra often wondered who she could possibly be having an affair with, in light of the fact that since they were married she was pregnant and covered in plaster. She never ventured to point this out to Michael, for fear of finding the rest of her self covered in a cast.

She was grateful for the casts, however much they itched, and she was not looking forward in the least to the day when inevitably they would come off. Frankly, when the bones in her legs and arms were almost mended and when her new doctor said that in less than a week all the casts could be removed, Barbra seriously considered keeping this information from Michael and leaving them on infinitely longer, irregardless of the endless itching. The casts were like a suit of armor that had kept her husband from hitting her for the longest time. There was nothing for him to hit with the exception of her face, and frankly it had become so sallow, sunken, and submissively despairing that he no longer had the desire that he once had to pummel it. One day, though, out of character, and out of the blue, while knitting a baby's bonnet, Barbra was brave enough, or stupid enough, or indifferent enough, to say, "You know that day when we met on our first date and I sucked you off at Yankee Stadium?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"You wanted to cum in my mouth."

"What about it. You said 'no' as I recall."

"Well I should have let you, because then I could have spit it back in your face!"

Face was the operative word it would seem, for that is where Michael hit her over and over and over again. And on the basis of this beating I don't believe she ever talked back to him again, nor did she ever finish the baby's bonnet, because Michael unravelled it right after the one-sided fist fight he had with her face.

It was around this time that the ghost of Stephen Crane came to see me. An American novelist, who died in the year 1990, but before doing so he wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*, and though I have never read the novel I can not help thinking how appropriate the title is for my heroine who never complains.

The ghost of Franz Kafka came that day as well. He was a Czechoslovakian Jewish novelist.

In his story *The Metamorphosis* the hero, a hardworking insurance agent, awakens to find that he has turned into an enormous cockroach, rejected by his family, he is left to die. I wish the same and much worse for Michael Burrows, and for all the other wife beaters like him in the world, but, short of annihilating him in the novel, there is nothing that I can do.

No more than five minutes after Franz Kafka's arrival we are joined by William Makepeace Thackeray, the English novelist, whose book *Vanity Fair* was a satire and elaborate study of social relationships in the early nineteenth century England. We discuss the nature of novels in general as vehicles for social commentary. And the violence in Barbra and Michael's married life leads us into a lengthy discussion about divorce.

Then the three ghosts and I are awarded with the presence of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The German poet, dramatist, and novelist, who generously left behind, after his death in 1832, the dramatic and crowning achievement of his life, the poem *Faust*; the first great work of literature in the spirit of modern individualism.

Now the four ghosts and I discuss the relationship that has evolved and or deteriorated in such a short time between my two protagonists, all the ramifications of wife abuse, and the importance of Barbra finding her individualism.

Somerset Maugham, who wrote *Of Human Bondage*, journeys into the room and he joins in our discussion just as Sir Walter Scott walks through the wall. One of the most prominent figures in English romanticism, the Scottish novelist, who also died in 1832, asks, "Were you aware that Michael and Barbra are being talked about by ghostwriters all around the world?"

Victor Hugo, the author of, among other things, *Les misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, is the next ghostwriter to arrive, and he informs me that he has heard Barbra and Michael's relationship referred to as the most gothic romance ever written.

Then, just when I think my hotel room could not be anymore charmed than it presently is by the writers that are already here, Jane arrives. "I just heard. Is it true? Is Michael beating Barbra?"

"Almost daily," I reply.

"That bastard. That son of a bitch," she says. "Tell me everything that's happened."

"Well, Barbra had the baby and he was named Michael Junior. He was eight pounds nine ounces at birth. Barbra's father passed away. William Burrows hasn't been in the book. He's busy with board meetings all the time. Evelyn Burrows, Michael's adoptive mother, is still in the New Jersey nursing home. Michael continues to visit her regularly, but he no longer takes Barbra along. Ludwig was let go and a nanny by the name of Mrs. Weatherspoon was hired. Barbra and Michael have been married for almost a year now. It will be their first wedding anniversary at the end of the month. I've been thinking about sending them away on a second honeymoon. Barbra calls me on the phone to keep me posted, but for quite some time I've put off paying them a visit. I've been reluctant to go in person, because I'm sure my readers would not be able to stomach some of the hideous things that go on in that brownstone. So far I've only revealed the basics of each beating."

"You have to tell every detail," Jane says. "You can't hold back or sugar coat the situation."

"I'm not sure if I should show them just how much of a monster Michael really is? My publisher wanted me to write something commercial. A romance novel, and I've already strayed far enough away from my original draft."

"Screw the industry," Jane says. "And so what if it doesn't sell. Tell it like it is."

I can always rely on Jane to get me to work. She chases the ghosts away politely and

immediately points towards my computer. After a brief struggle to get in touch with my writing muse I find myself inside Barbra and Michael's brownstone. They are both unaware of my presence, so unbeknownst as I am to them I am able to observe their behavior without them knowing and without their altering their actions in any way for my benefit. So, as objectively as I can I will describe in a third person narrative, as best as I can, precisely what goes on in the Burrows' residence.

"Barbra! Where the hell did you put my tennis racket?"

"It's in the hall closet, honey, where you left it."

"No, it's not. I just looked in there."

All of Barbra's plaster casts have been removed. She has been liberated from the wheelchair onto a pair of crutches. Her slings are also a thing of the past. Using the crutches, for however long it will take for her legs to regain their strength and recover completely, is a hardship, for her arms, although healed, are invariably weak as well.

"Help me find it. I'm going to be late," Michael hollers, just as she hobbles into the room. Supporting herself on the crutches she painstakingly lifts her legs with her arms and the two wooden sticks. It takes an enormous amount of energy and endurance for her to cross the living room, so much so that she is out of breath by the time she reaches her decided destination - the hall closet.

"I already checked there, you stupid wench!"

Standing rather unsteadily on her own she removes his golf clubs to reveal the tennis racket that Michael himself placed there only recently. "I told you it was here," she says. Then realizing her mistake of having said these chastising words: "I told you so," she displays a sweet smile from one corner of her mouth to the other which says: "Michael, dear, I'm sorry. I was wrong and you were right."

"You put it there, didn't you, you dumb fucking broad."

"I..." she starts to say, but he stops her mid sentence by slapping her savagely across the face; and the words "I am sorry," which she was about to sputter are walloped into outer space - synonymous with the stars that are swirling around in her head at this very moment. Barbra yelps and from upstairs the creaking sound of a door being closed can be heard. Mrs. Weatherspoon, the nanny, an elderly widow, has locked herself and the baby up in the nursery, as is her way whenever she hears the beginnings of "a Burrows fight."

"Lying fucking bitch," Michael bellows, and then he bashes one side of his wife's head with the tennis racket. On the brink of unconsciousness Barbra knocks over the golf clubs, that scatter every which way, while the crutches that she was holding crash, with her, to the hardwood floor. Here, it is her misfortune to remain conscious, to feel the blood oozing down from her temple, and to see Michael standing over her imperially. She begins crying with total abandonment. "Please, Michael, I'm just getting better."

He doesn't seem to hear her, or if he did he doesn't seem to care. He grabs one of the golf clubs. Tee off time, Barbra thinks to herself, unable to stop the game that she knows is about to begin, or the gasping sobs that continue to escape from within her in a convulsive manner. "FOUR!" Michael, the maniac, shouts just a millisecond prior to slamming the iron club into Barbra's backside with maximum force.

Barbra screams involuntarily and inevitably loud enough for the Ingleson's next door to hear what is going on. This, more than anything, is always guaranteed to make Michael become even angrier. "Keep your mouth shut, slut, or I'll ram this golf club down your throat and up your ass

at the same time." He clears out the phlegm in his throat and then he spits the green mucus into her hair. Not satisfied by such a simple show of degradation he drags his diligent bride by her hair into the middle of the living room, where he forces her to lie face down on the floor. He pulls out his six and a half inch penis and he pees on the back of her head while laughing out loud. "My God, how many beers did he drink?" Barbra thinks to herself. She curses the fact that she is on a hardwood floor and not a carpeted one that would absorb his urine, so then at least she would not be lying in such a puddle. Against her better judgement she cries out in humiliation and begins to rise in protest. A smirking Michael, zipping up his pants in a mechanical manner, laughs again when he sees her slip and fall back down. Bent over "the back-talking bitch" he pushes her face into the hardwood floor and subsequently into his urine.

"Lick it up like a dog," he growls. Then after procuring enough torture upon her person to get Barbra to stick out her tongue he hauls her into the closet. He gathers his golf clubs and he composedly takes them, along with the only key to the closet, as he leaves through the front door. He has gone out to play golf, for all along he had no intention of playing tennis. Today is Sunday. He plays tennis on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and Barbra knew better than anyone that when he beckoned her into the living room to retrieve the tennis racket it was what had sadly become their ritualistic calling. As far as she is concerned it was just another sadistic Sunday afternoon in the Burrows' residence.

Chapter Fifteen

Jane Austen is the only person at present, dead or alive, who knows anything about the degree of abuse and degradation I am allowing my heroine to undergo. Today, I told her the whole story. The part about meeting Barbra at The Tavern on the Green for lunch and about the conversation that took place on both occasions.

"I think she's suffered enough," I say to Jane.

"I think so too. Anymore abuse and she'll be an invalid for life."

It is five o'clock in the afternoon and many of the office lights in the Random House Building have just gone off. Their work day is done, but, nocturnal writer and insomniac that I sometimes am, mine is just beginning. My writing muse informs me that another chapter in the tumultuous life of the Burrows is about to begin.

"Hello, Barbra."

"Hi, J.C.," she says, having opened the front door of the brownstone despondently.

"May I come in?"

"Of course."

Sitting down in the living room the first thing I do is remind her about our conversation at The Tavern on the Green. "You were adamant about leaving Michael, but I wouldn't let you." I also tell her that she can now begin to fight back however she wishes. "You have portrayed the battered bride brilliantly. Without a doubt you have put in an outstanding performance. You truly are a heroine."

"Thank you, J.C.," she wretchedly replies. "God knows I have tried my best to be a good wife and to go through with the ordeal as you wished."

"I didn't leave you much choice. I wrote it that way, but now you may leave him whenever you want."

She laughs and her laughter is both ironic and despairing. "I don't want to leave him anymore. I've grown accustomed to the beatings, and it's no secret that I have never stopped loving Michael. I think I love him now more than ever before."

"More than you love yourself?" I ask in amazement, and I can't help wondering what happened to the woman with a will of her own who swore she would never live with an abusive husband.

"Myself," she laughs, "I no longer have a self," she says.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. Do you love your son?"

"Of course. He's the son of the husband that I adore."

"How can you still be in love with Michael after all the horrible things he's done to you? And how can you allow your son to grow up in a house that is so full of violence?"

"I'm in love with a monster. What more can I say?"

"It's all my fault. I allowed it to go on for far too long. I will make him stop and then you can stay together without anymore abuse. I'll turn the book back into a regular romance. Not all novels have to be socially significant."

She blows her cigarette smoke directly at me in a derisive manner, yet I am astute enough to notice that behind her bold front she is secretly relieved. "Either way I will never leave him, but if you can make him stop I wish you would."

"Where is he?"

She shrugs her shoulders complacently. "I have no idea. The bank closed twenty minutes ago, but he won't be home for hours."

Sitting in a rocking chair across from Barbra, who is seated on a duvet, I just now notice that there are bruises on both of her arms and welts on her back from where he recently whipped her with a leather leash.

"He's found a new way to vent his anger," she says when she sees me staring, and the taut tone of voice tells me that she should find a way to vent some of her own.

"The heel will be home in exactly three seconds," I say sounding very sure of myself, and why shouldn't I be, since after all I am the author.

Shaking her head in absolute disbelief, Barbra says, "Don't be ridiculous. He hasn't been home for dinner in months."

"One, two, three," I count, and Michael comes in the front door smiling and carrying an arrangement of wild flowers that he picked for his wife on his way home from work? Impossible, we're not in the country we're in New York City, I remind myself, so instead permit me to say that he is carrying a small bouquet of somewhat wilted pansies that he purchased for a buck seventy five from a street vender.

"It's the thought that counts," I inform Barbra when I go into the kitchen with her to put the flowers into a vase. "Everything will be fine from now on," I assure her. "Trust me. Go back into the living room and don't be afraid."

She does as I tell her. It seems she is accustomed to taking orders, for she obeys me like a well trained dog would. It dawns on me that dogs are referred to as man's best friend, and I wonder to myself, shouldn't women be? I follow Barbra into the living room, where I proceed to turn this perturbing book back into the romance novel that it once was. I begin by removing the sneer that has besmirched Michael's face for the past year. And it would seem that I am successful, for when I sit down in the rocking chair, across from Michael and Barbra sitting together on the duvet, I discern a genuine smile on Michael's handsome face. Furthermore, I should inform you

readers that he is holding my heroine's hand. His blue eyes are full of love. Love that undoubtedly he will lavish on Mrs. Burrows upon my imminent departure and for the rest of her long life. There is a lump in his throat, which I gather is caused by guilt, and his voice is thick with heart-wrenching emotion when he exclaims, "I don't know what's come over me. I feel like a new man. As long as I live I will never harm you in any way or raise my hand to you in anger ever again."

Barbra looks at me for verification, so I nod my head to confirm that he is telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so God help him if he dares to strike her ever again. Barbra's smile is ecstatic, yet she can not begin to comprehend the sudden change that has come over her husband. She looks at me, however, with a grate deal of gratitude; though she is still slightly suspicious of his altered state, for in the back of her eyes I can see a smidgen of mistrust. I remove her mistrust of Michael and I replace it with the blind adoration that was hers for Michael Burrows before the beatings began. "Now, before I leave you two lovebirds alone I've got a surprise for you both."

"What?" Barbra asks.

"The first one is not really a surprise. It's more like good news. Michael I have just been informed by my writing muse that your biological mother was not a twenty dollar whore."

"She wasn't?"

"No, and she did not leave you to die in the woods. She wanted you very much. She loved you more than anything in the world, but circumstances were such that she was forced to give you up for adoption. And your father was not an anonymous drunken sailor. He was a soldier in the Vietnam war, but unfortunately he was killed in action before he found out that the woman he loved and left back in the United States before going to war was pregnant. He died a hero."

"Why did my mother give me up for adoption?"

"Upon finding out about her husband's death in Vietnam she became very ill. Two days after giving birth to you she was told she had less than six months to live. She did the only thing she possibly could. She gave you up for adoption, and although she lived six months longer than the doctors predicted she remained in the hospital all during that time. You were placed in a foster home with a loving family for only a short while before the Burrows adopted you, and I might add that they did so with nothing but love in their hearts. You were not a possession to the infertile pair you were a long awaited prize."

"Oh, Michael, I'm so happy for you," Barbra gushes. "What was the other surprise?" she asks.

"Well as you know it's your wedding anniversary next Saturday. You're going on a Caribbean cruise for two weeks. I've made all the necessary arrangements. Michael Junior will stay here with Mrs. Weatherspoon, and..."

"Wow, I've always wanted to go to the West Indies."

"Me too," Michael says. "We'll make it our second honeymoon."

"Oh, how romantic," Barbra coos.

"It will be I assure you both. I am determined to turn this book back into a romance. Barbra, you'll get to wear a thong bikini on the beach. And you, sir, are going to rub suntan lotion all over her body. You're going to make mad passionate love to each other every evening on the sandy starlit beaches. And with a full moon shining down upon your gorgeous tanned bodies, and with the ocean waves washing up against the shore and across your bare legs, you will both believe you have found the most pleasurable paradise know to man. Together you will come to realize that there is nothing more blissful than the love that can exist between two people. Your boat sets

sail Saturday morning. Be there and be happy. Bon Voyage."

"How did it go? asks Jane, who has just come back with some bagels and cream cheese.

"You were right," I tell her. "I was just in time. Barbra no longer wanted to leave him. She was in sorrowful shape. A hollow figure of the woman that she once was. I had to do some major rewriting, but I think I have their relationship back on track. Anyway, I'm sending them on a Caribbean cruise through the West Indies for two weeks."

"That's marvelous. Are you hungry?" Jane asks.

"I haven't eaten, but how did you get those?"

"I stole them from the delicatessen down the street," she says, as she bites into one of the bagels.

"And you floated them all the way here? Didn't anybody on the street, in the lobby, in the elevator, in the hallway, wonder why a brown paper bag was moving in mid air all by itself without the help of a human hand?"

"Don't go getting hysterical. You know, J.C., you're too uptight. For your own good you should try to relax more. I was very discreet. No one saw a thing. Besides, this is New York City. Nobody gives a damn what anybody else does. Here, have a bagel before you have a nervous breakdown. Are you going back to work?"

"I'm not writing anymore tonight. Michael and Barbra are in bed making love more passionately than ever before. In fact if it was anymore passionate it would probably be pornographic. Anyway, they don't need me barging in, so I'm not about to disturb their reconciliation. I was going to wait until after they come back from the Caribbean before doing anymore writing, but I've decided I will see them off on Saturday morning."

"Good. Then let's go out. There's a new nightclub in Soho that I'm dying to go to."

"In your state of being that's really no big deal."

"I'm glad to hear you haven't lost your sense of humor. So, what do you say?"

"Sure, but I have to change my clothes. And I'll only go with you if you promise not to embarrass me by putting on a magic show behind some poor unsuspecting bartender's back, like you did the last time we went bar haunting."

"I promise to be a good ghost, if you promise to get up and dance?"

"Oh, all right, but you know how much I hate to be seen on a dance floor by myself. It makes me feel narcissistic."

It was five in the morning before I got back to the Waldorf=Astoria. Jane is always inclined to see me safely home and that evening was no different. We said good night to each other just outside the hotel on Lexington Avenue. Jane started across the street, while I stood under the awning. I was on the verge of yelling "Jane, look out for the bus," when I realized there was no need and the mini bus that was barreling along Lexington Avenue ran right through her. Well aware that I was watching her with eyes wide open Jane turned around and shouted, "One of the benefits of being a ghost is that you don't have to look both ways before crossing the street." Then she slipped silently off into the night to roam around the Random House Building, and to "play a practical joke on the janitor," as she put it.

After spending the whole of an entire week editing and revising the previous chapters I come to the point in time when Barbra and Michael are about to leave for their second honeymoon. I am bothered, however, by a scene in chapter fourteen. I am tempted to take out the part where Michael pees on Barbra, because I do not want to offend my readers, but it happened, so after a few more hours of deliberation I decide to leave it in the book.

On Saturday morning I am up early, despite the fact that me and Jane were out at a nightclub again last night. After several cups of coffee, however, I am composed enough to see Barbra and Michael safely aboard the cruise ship. I am hoping that this huge ocean faring vessel will take them to a place of tranquility. Surely, I think to myself, their second honeymoon, waiting for them on the horizon, is bound to be the start of a brand new life. I would also like to believe that they will live happily ever after. End of story. Yet, while waving good bye to them both I am struck with a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. Though they are hugging each other on the deck of the ship their carefree smiles do not convince me that all is well, or that a happy ending is waiting for either one of them on that hypothetical horizon. I hate to be the harbinger of harrowing news, and I hope that I am not, but as Michael stares towards the stern of the ship I observe, what I deem to be, a dangerous glint in his eyes. Barbra, on the other hand, is looking towards the bow of the boat and subsequently towards the Statue of Liberty. There is nothing but blind adoration in her eyes, and try as I might I am unable to incorporate into them a look of caution or a glimmering of mistrust, which are the two things she will need most of all if my fears about Michael are not unfounded. Some of the scenarios that I see on their horizon, however, cause me to worry that my fears are not unfounded, and that once again our hero Michael Bartholomew Burrows not only has an abominable will of his own but animosity towards his wife. I turn dejectedly to walk away from the shipping docks just as a flock of squawking sea gulls fly by. For the time being my thoughts turn entirely to the birds directly above my head, yet my misgivings about Barbra and Michael's second honeymoon will remain to be an overwhelming concern long after the ocean liner leaves the harbor.

Chapter Sixteen

I have not had any visitors, living or otherwise, all week long. It has been several days since I have seen a ghost. Even Jane has not been around the hotel. Nor have I seen Michael and Barbra since they left a week ago today, but my uneasiness about their second honeymoon has not gone away.

I am planning on starting work early today, yet it is late in the afternoon before I finally get to my computer. I have Jonathan Swift to thank for the delay, though I do not resent his arrival, since he is the author of *Gulliver's Travels*; a savagely bitter work, which he tells me took him more than six years to write. In the book he mocks all humankind and I am about to ask him why when he becomes dizzy. It seems, even as a ghost, he suffers from frequent attacks of vertigo, and his having an attack at this time prompts me to suggest that he lie down on my bed until it is over.

His being indisposed does not give me leeway to go ahead with my writing as I would like, because Mr. Swift was not alone when he arrived at my hotel room. The American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne was with him. "The Scarlet Letter caused quite a stir," says Mr. Hawthorne to me about the book that is regarded by many to be his masterpiece.

"I haven't read it, yet," I reply.

The English author Kenneth Grahame is here as well, and I am obliged to tell him: "Your novel *The Wind in the Willows*, was part of the inspiration behind one of my own novels, Mr.

Grahame. I too used anthropomorphic animal characters to convey an environmental message in my second book."

The ghost of Kenneth Grahame tells me that he is flattered at my having been inspired by his book. I am also told by my ghostly visitors that the reclusive J.D. Salinger, author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, is sitting down in the lobby. For some reason or another he is reluctant to come up until Mr. Swift, recovered from his dizzy spell, decides to go down and get him. After Mr. Salinger is encouraged to come up to my room I ask him all about the homosexual undercurrents in *The Catcher in the Rye*. "I believe it was the first novel, of literary merit at least, that I ever read," I say to Mr. Salinger.

It is late in the afternoon, like previously stated, before I am finally alone and am able to get any work done. A phone call from my publisher two days ago telling me to hurry up and finish the book is one reason for my impatience. Being that I work best under pressure deadlines are not a detriment to my creative process, they are a blessing, but sitting down at my work station I can't help wondering how long my solitude will last.

From New York I travel south along coastal interstate highway 95 all the way to Florida. From here it is only a matter of time before I find myself on a subtropical island called Key West, the southernmost point of the United States and a gay resort town. Since I am unable to go any farther on land I make my way across the turquoise colored warm waters of the Caribbean Sea. Searching in such a picturesque, tropical, sunny setting for my hero and heroine is a pleasure. Palm trees, blossoming Hibiscuses, beautiful Bougainvillea vines, and white coral sand covered beaches are nearly everywhere I look. In correspondence with the agenda given to me by my travel agent, better known as my writing muse, the cruise ship that Barbra and Michael took stopped in Freeport, Nassau, San Salvador, the island of Caicos, San Juan: the capital city of Puerto Rico, St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, and still farther south it docked in St. Croix. Right now, according to my calculations, the cruise ship should be somewhere off the coast of Martinique en route to its final destination the beautiful Bridgetown, Barbados. Having made my way safely through the West Indies, and having seen the splendid landscape of several islands, I am now awarded with seeing in the distance the lights of the cruise ship in question. It is night time when I arrive on deck, and immediately upon my embarkment I hear the shouting of many men: "Man overboard. Man overboard. Man overboard."

My solitude does not last long, for once again I am interrupted by the arrival of a ghostwriter; none other than Noel Coward. The English playwright, who penned such plays as *The Vortex*, appears in my room. As honored as I am by his presence I can not help wishing he would leave, so that I can return to the ship and find out what all that shouting was about. Fortunately, Mr. Coward stays for only a short while; nevertheless, before getting even halfway across the Caribbean, I am visited by yet another ghostwriter. He comes through the outer wall and I am not as perturbed as I might have been if he wasn't the one and only Marcel Proust. Author of the awesome novel *Remembrance of Things Past* I am so utterly impressed by him that his ghostly presence makes me forget for the time being all about my book. "Mr. Proust, forgive me for not having read your novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, yet... I've heard many wonderful things about it, but it's such a big book, and..."

"Oh, don't mention it, J.C., I've never read any of your books either."

It is almost midnight before Mr. Proust leaves and I get back to work. In view of my being rather tired as I make the trip to my computer allow me, if you will, to refrain from the labor of having to describe to you once again my journey across the Caribbean.

The first thing I discern on the deck of the ship is an hysterical Barbra. She is fifteen or twenty feet in front of me and accompanying her is the captain of the ship. He is attempting to calm her down, while simultaneously trying to find out the circumstances surrounding one of his passengers falling overboard.

"Did anyone see him go overboard?" the captain inquires.

Several shipmates and passengers reply in the negative. "What happened, Mrs. Burrows?" the captain asks.

"Barbra," I call.

Upon hearing my voice she looks up. I am walking towards her, but unable to wait until I reach her she leaves the captain's side, rushes over to me, and throws her arms around my neck.

"Oh, J.C., I'm so glad you're here."

"It's all right. Tell me what happened?"

"He beat me again," she cries.

"That creep. You're divorcing him and that's all there is to it."

Shaking her head, she tells me, "It's too late."

"It's never too late," I reply. "You can file for a divorce in the next chapter," I assure her.

"You don't understand. I killed him."

I pull her towards me and tell her to keep her voice down. "Where is he?"

"He's, he's, in the ocean," she wails.

"Don't, say another word to anyone," I warn in a whisper.

I peer past Barbra and into the eyes of the captain, who is watching us suspiciously. "I saw everything, sir. Michael Burrows jumped overboard. I am friends of the Burrows and I can vouch for the fact that Michael has been severely depressed for several months, which is why he and his loving wife came on this cruise."

The captain moves towards us in what I imagine to be a menacing way. The man is in his mid thirties and he reminds me of Jack London's main character "Wolf Larsen" in his novel *The Sea Wolf*. "I've contacted the coast guard and the local authorities," the captain says, as he continues coming towards us. "They will search for your husband, mame. You should take Mrs. Burrows to her cabin and we'll send the ship's doctor in to see her," he adds, and now that we are face to face I can see that he is the epitome of niceness and nothing at all like the mean-spirited and spiteful "Wolf Larsen."

"Come along, Barbra," I say decisively, and once inside her cabin I urge her to tell me the whole story. Shaking uncontrollably, however, she is not even capable of lighting a cigarette for herself. I am obliged to do it for her. And, "Cover yourself up with this blanket."

"Th...th...th...thanks," she says.

"Start from the beginning and take your time," I tell her.

"Well, all week everything was wonderful," she begins tentatively. "It was like it was before we were married, until the day before yesterday when we docked in St. Croix. We spent the morning ashore shopping for souvenirs. Michael seemed to be in a good mood. He bought me some gold jewelry and a new bathing suit. I bought him a watch, some toys for Michael Junior, and a set of carving knives for Mrs. Weatherspoon, since she's always complaining about the old set we have at home. Anyway, Michael became upset. He said something about having to carry them through customs, but he wasn't as mad as he might have been. I told him he was right, and then he surprised me by saying 'Oh, what the heck, they're stainless steel and we need new ones anyway,' so I kept the knives. Late in the evening we reboarded the cruise ship and left St. Croix.

Then the following day we ate dinner with another couple and afterwards we all went to a dance that was being held in the state ballroom. I don't remember the couple's last name. Jerry and Martha something. Anyway, Jerry was a veteran of Vietnam and he knew Michael's biological father. When Michael found out about the Vietnamese villages full of women and children that his father helped to rape and massacre he became enraged. Before the dance was over we went back to our cabin. I was in the bathroom, so I don't know what Michael had been doing, but when I came out he asked, 'Where are the knives we bought for Mrs. Weatherspoon?'

'Aren't they with the rest of the parcels?'

'No,' he replied.

'I must have left them behind in St. Croix,' I said, and that was the spark that set off the time bomb that blew our second honeymoon all to hell. He became furious. The funny thing is I saw it coming. I'd been expecting it, because right after Jerry made that remark about Vietnam Michael began drinking double martinis instead of singles. Needless to say, he beat me and when he was done he tied me up. I spent the remainder of the night and most of today bound and gagged. He left me in the cabin until early this evening. Apparently he spent the day lounging by the pool. He came back around dinner time and he untied me. We ate in the cabin and all during dinner he threatened me with one thing or another. The monster Michael was back. After forcing myself to finish all of my food, for Michael hates it whenever I leave anything on my plate, I went into my overnight bag to get out a package of cigarettes and that's when I saw the knives. It wasn't until then that I remembered putting them there before we reboarded the ship. I was about to say, 'Michael, I found the knives,' but something stopped me. I knew he would just get more angry and that he'd have cause to call me a stupid fucking forgetful bitch, yet there was also another reason that kept me from confessing my finding the knives. At the time I did not know what. I had no murderous motive in mind. There was nothing premeditated about my actions when I took out the pack of cigarettes, closed my bag, and said nothing. Michael wanted to go to the bar, so we got dressed. I had to put on a lot of make-up to cover the bruises from the night before. Again he ordered double martinis and he drank them as though they were water. I knew what was going to happen later and I dreaded it. I realized how foolish I'd been to believe once again that the beatings had stopped. More than once at the bar Michael mentioned misgivings he had about his father "the so called war hero." I told him that maybe you had been mistaken again about his background and that even if you weren't William Burrows was a wonderful man, but Michael wasn't listening. I tried to convince him that it didn't matter who his parents were. I don't think he heard a word I said. Sitting on a bar stool beside him my mind went back and forth between the beating I would be getting later and the knives in my overnight bag. When the bar closed and when he was good and drunk he dragged me down to our cabin."

"Dragged?"

"Well maybe not to someone watching, but I didn't want to go with him, so in a sense you could say that he dragged me."

"Go on."

"As soon as we were inside he locked the cabin door. There was nothing unusual about his locking the door it was the way he tried to surreptitiously fastened the latch that made me worry. Anyhow, right away he started ranting and raving about this and that and before long he brought up the subject of the knives, as an excuse to badger me if for no other reason. 'I found the knives,' I yelled, and I suppose I shouldn't have, but I'd had a few too many drinks myself and I just didn't care anymore. I figured either way he was going to beat me."

'You what?' he shouted. 'When?'

'Yesterday?' he screamed, and without asking me where they were, or why I hadn't told him, he started hitting me." Barbra stops talking. Looking towards the porthole with terror in her eyes she suddenly shrieks.

"What is it?" I ask, looking towards the porthole as well.

"I could have sworn I seen Michael's face," she says with a fearful expression on her face.

"You're in a state of shock," I tell her. "Try to relax, the doctor should be here soon." She is silent for a short while, as she continues staring towards the porthole. It does not take telepathy on my part to know that her thoughts have wandered to her husband lost at sea.

"Then what happened?" I have to ask, as she is too preoccupied to begin on her own. She tells me the rest of the story, which I will now convey to you readers as best as I can, since her narration of the events leading up to Michael's death was done incoherently and in a confused state of mind. Even I had difficulty formulating a full understanding of the facts from the fragmented things she said, and I had to get her to repeat her hysterical self several times.

She did tell me in great detail how, after finding out about the knives, he tied her up on the bed by the hands and feet. She had no intentions of untying herself when he went for "a stroll on deck," for apparently on a previous occasion she learned that freeing herself could be a fatal mistake. "Better to stay tied up until he comes back," she told me. She admitted to me that the discomfort of being hog tied is far less painful than the vengeful repercussions she would have to endure if he found out she'd gotten free against his will. But tonight, there was a knock on the cabin door. It was the steward. Someone on board, likely the couple in the cabin next door, reported hearing "a ferocious fight." The steward wanted to know if Barbra was all right, but she was gagged and could not answer. She didn't want anyone on board to find out about Michael, nor did she want the steward to see her humiliation of being bound and gagged. She wriggled herself to the foot of the bed, managed to take one of the knives out of her overnight bag, and then further managed to cut the ropes that were around her wrists. She removed the gag that covered her mouth and called hoarsely to the steward, "I'm all right," but apparently he kept on knocking. He would not go away even after her further insisting that she was fine. I suppose he wanted to see for himself. Make sure that she wasn't being coerced into making the claim. "I think my voice cracked and sounded weak which made him all the more suspicious," Barbra said. She untied the ropes around her ankles, wiped some blood off her face, fixed her hair, and opened the door. "See, I'm fine. Fight? No, no fighting in here. I'm all alone. I had my radio on and there was a live broadcast of a boxing match," were her exact words. Smiling and nodding his head compassionately Barbra could tell that he did not believe her. How could he when her left eye was black from the day before, her right eye was blackening, her lip was bleeding, there were bruises on both of her cheeks, her nose was broken, and there was more blood trickling in two streams from both of her nostrils. Whatever his reasoning the steward was reluctant to leave. "My husband is up on deck and he won't like seeing a strange man at my cabin door," Barbra said, and then pointblank she told him to go. She was trying desperately to put the ropes into their rightful place when Michael returned. The moment he saw her he rushed towards her without any hesitation whatsoever. It was as though Barbra had broken a commandment of some kind by removing the ropes. In a rage he knocked her against the cabin wall and then for the second time in their marriage he started to strangle her.

He had only throttled her once before. Coming home from work one night to find her walking freely about the house (after all the time he spent tying her up that morning) he snarled, "I see

you liberated yourself, woman." Then without anymore provocation that pitiful evening he grabbed her by the throat. She awoke from a state of unconsciousness locked in a dark closet, tied up, and gagged once again. Thereafter, having learned an invaluable lesson, she resigned to remain tied, and she certainly would have stayed tied up this time too if it had not been for the stalwartness of that steward.

With his eyes bulging and with his hands wrapped around her throat Michael squeezed unyieldingly, while Barbra's fingers, clawing the covers of the bed, by chance touched the handle of the knife, which she had previously placed under a pillow when the steward came. Michael was not planning on killing her. He would release his grip the moment she became unconscious, as he had done before. But, how could Barbra have known? Already in a semi conscious state, and with her eyes bulging albeit for a different reason, she stabbed him with no thought as to what she was doing. Her sole motive, had the case ever gone to court, was to usurp some much needed oxygen into her depleted lungs. Gasping and choking, she could tell that Michael's wound was not the least bit life threatening. Nevertheless, there seemed to him to be a lot of blood spurting from the gash in his neck, which made Michael wild with fear. He was convinced he was going to die at any given moment. He ran up on deck and with the knife in her hand Barbra followed him. "I wasn't even aware that I was still holding it," she swore to me. "Michael come back. I'm sorry," she called, but he spun around and he hit her so hard that she went sailing to the edge of the deck. With the help of the railing she pulled herself up just in time to see him coming at her again and this time it was with the intent to kill. "I don't know for sure if he would have killed me or not," she hysterically confessed, "but the look he had in his eyes said he was going to." She stepped away from the railing just as he lunged for her. He fell forward himself and apparently that's when Barbra brought the knife down and drove it into his back. It was a butcher's knife. The biggest in the set and not only was the handle protruding from his back at a ninety degree angle the blade was all but buried inside of him. "I don't know why I did it. I just knew that if I didn't he would have beat me. He might have even killed me for cutting him with the knife in the first place." Michael wasn't dead, but he was leaning over the railing taking his last few breaths when Barbra heard men's voices on the starboard side of the ship. "I barely knew what I was doing when I grabbed him by the feet and flipped him headfirst over the railing," she confessed. Then following Michael's "unholy scream" and the subsequent "splashing sound" Michael made when he hit the water, Barbra heard someone yell "Man overboard," but that's all she remembers, for she fainted and when the crew members found her she was lying on the deck unconscious.

"According to the captain someone saw Michael flailing about in the water at the stem of the ship as the boat went by," Barbra informs me after she has finished telling me everything else that happened.

"Nobody knows there was a knife in his back before he went overboard, do they?" I ask.

"No," Barbra replies fearfully.

"That's good, and you are never to tell anyone. He committed suicide and I am an eye witness. Hopefully, the sharks will eat him and no one will ever be the wiser. There's no reason for you to go to prison. You don't belong behind bars. It was self- defense at best and justifiable homicide at the very least. I knew something was not right when I saw the two of you standing aboard the boat at the harbor in New York City. I'm sorry, Barbra, but in my opinion Michael Burrows got only a fraction of what he deserved."

"Don't you know, J.C., I still love him. And now I've killed him. How can I ever live with

myself?"

"You can and you will. We're going home at once."

"What about the authorities?"

"Don't worry about them. I can handle the police," I say when suddenly there is a knock on the cabin door. "It must be the ship's doctor. Now remember, not a word to anyone."

She nods her head in agreement and proceeds to gaze at the porthole.

"Doctor, could you give her something to help her sleep. She's been through a traumatic experience."

"By those bruises I would say she's been beaten," the doctor replies and the only thing that can be heard in the room all during his examination, with the exception of Barbra's deep erratic breathing, is the sound of our protective silence and the occasional sympathetic sigh from the doctor.

With Barbra sleeping soundly and for several hours from the sedative the doctor gave her, I decide to go on deck. I stare for the remainder of the night at the calm surface of the Caribbean. I can't help feeling sorry for Barbra at the present moment, anymore than I can help feeling antipathy towards my overimaginative writing muse. "She didn't deserve any of this," I say to myself, yet, I am delighted that Michael Burrows is dead. "Good riddance," I say to him.

At length I am content to watch the sunrise, and I am stilled by the sound of the sea waves slapping gently against the side of the ship, until a sound that I was not expecting causes me to jump.

Back in my hotel room, Daniel Defoe, sitting on my bed unobtrusively browsing through a book, burps. It is my copy of his novel Robinson Crusoe that he is reading at random.

"Mr. Defoe, you scared me. I didn't know you were here. Usually I can tell when a ghost comes into my room, but I was so immersed in my writing. Something horrible just happened to my heroine. Something I had no control over."

"Indeed," says Daniel Defoe, "characters do have a way of taking on a life of their own."

Chapter Seventeen

Shy, bashful, George Bernard Shaw, the Irish born dramatist of such classics as Pygmalion and the Pulitzer Prize winning play Saint Joan; Nobel Prize winning playwright Eugene O'Neill, whose renowned plays are too numerous to list, and Jane Austen all went with me to the funeral. Or, more accurately they were all present in my hotel room when I accompanied Barbra to the funeral. I felt that it was necessary for me to go with her for several reasons. One, to give you readers some insight into the occasion. Two, she has no friends to comfort her in her time of grief. Regrettably, after her marriage she failed to keep in touch with the other prostitutes she knew on the street. Michael would not have allowed it. Her only family member is her mother, since, I may or may not have mentioned, Barbra has no brothers or sisters. And finally over the course of writing about her I have come to care for her deeply, as a good writer must for his main protagonist, particularly when she is a young widow with a small child.

Michael's funeral was a dark dismal day for everyone involved, though it seemed that for the rest of the city the sun was shining brightly - setting aside of course the multitude of people who

have problems of their own and there are hordes of them in the city of New York. Staying within the boundaries of this book though, I would like to go on record as saying that I wanted it to rain. I even began writing it that way until the cliché of having a rainy day for the funeral caused me to change my mind. Moreover, I had trouble conjuring up a rainstorm, since the day that George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill, and Jane Austen paid me a visit, the day I wrote the cemetery scene, the sun, like I said, was shining. If it's any consolation whatsoever, to any reader hoping for a more melodramatic or sinister setting the ozone layer was especially thin that day and the two hundred year old gothic looking graveyard was a gloomy, if not an altogether eerie place.

As for the funeral itself Michael's adoptive father, William Burrows, was there, as was Barbra's mother, Mrs. Lovenstein. Michael's adoptive mother, Evelyn Burrows, could not attend. She'd suffered another stroke at the nursing home and was now more bedridden than ever before. She had been duly informed about the death of her adopted son, but the news did not seem to upset her, or if it did she showed no signs of being deeply distressed. She simply sighed and mumbled something about her son being in the hands of God.

I drove with Barbra to the cemetery in a long black limousine. We followed directly behind the hearse, which carried an empty coffin. Mr. Burrows insisted on buying and burying a casket just in case Michael's body was ever found or in case Michael's spirit, as Mr. Burrows so plaintively put it, "needs a warm safe place to go." I was tempted to tell the old man, just as I had been tempted to tell Mrs. Burrows, who believed that her boy was in God's hands, that it (Michael's spirit) had gone straight to hell and it would not need a wooden box to keep itself warm. I said nothing of the sort to either; however, sitting in the limousine beside my heartbroken heroine I do mention something about Michael's having been sent to hell as an incentive for her to stop crying. She has been weeping all morning long. Weeping, as it were, for the man that tried his best to put her into the very place where she sent him, an early grave. It baffles me how Barbra could be upset by Michael's death. I was delighted when she described all the grisly details about her putting that butcher knife into his back and I still get gruesomely excited whenever I think about his body rotting at the bottom of the sea. There is a thing called poetic justice, I merrily conclude, and once the shock of having killed him herself wore off I assumed she would be as happy as I about Michael's demise. Not so. She has been distraught since getting back to New York and today she is dangerously despondent as well. I am led to believe that at the moment her misery is manifesting itself so readily, because she is obliged to miss Michael more than ever now that we are about to bury him, in memory if not in body. "Funerals have a way of forcing those left behind to face the finality of death," is the explanation offered by William Burrows. It would be my guess that she is also feeling guilty and ashamed for stabbing him in the back the way she did. "It was self-defense. You had no choice. Even if he wasn't intent on killing you he could have quite easily done so accidentally. Every time he hit you he was taking the risk of ending your life," I tell her now, as I have told her several times since coming back from the Caribbean. An unintelligible ghastly sound escapes from her mouth involuntarily and she continues to cry. Her eyes are blood shot from all the tears she has shed. She has been crying since early this morning when we met. According to Mrs. Weatherspoon she was up most of the night and the sound of her incessant weeping could be heard throughout the entire house. As I hand her a tissue, so that she can blow her broken nose, I think how I must be a matchmaker from hell. It also occurs to me for the first time since returning from the Caribbean how my romance novel is irrevocably ruined.

It is my opinion that Michael's body will never be found and the coffin that the pallbearers

lower into the ground shall remain as empty as his heart was when he was among the living. While listening to the words of the priest, who is praying (in vain) for the soul of Michael Bartholomew Burrows, Barbra begins to wail. I don't know what to do with her except to keep her steady on her feet. The service is long and an arduous affair and Barbra continues to cry throughout most of it, as does William Burrows. Myself and Mrs. Lovenstein are the only ones who remain dry-eyed and unmoved by Michael's death. The bruises on Barbra were all the evidence needed by Mrs. Lovenstein to formulate an opinion of her own about the marriage and what she had previously deemed to be her daughter's desertion.

"Good bye, Michael, my love," Barbra whispers. "I'm sorry," she says with a heartbreaking tone of voice. Then overwrought with emotion she emphatically throws a handful of flowers into the freshly dug grave atop of the empty coffin.

I take her by the hand and tell her that it's time to go. I also tell her, as I lead her to the long black limousine, that it's time for her to start anew. "It's time to put the past behind you. You have to get on with your life."

I instruct the limousine driver to take us directly home. He drops us off in front of Barbra's brownstone and I walk with her up to the front door. "Are you sure you'll be all right in this big old house all by yourself?"

"I'll be fine," she assures me, and I see her smile for the first time since the night when she killed Michael. It is not a big benevolent smile to be sure, but I believe it to be a beginning.

"Well you've got my number at the hotel. Call me if you need anything or even if you just want to talk. I'll drop by in a few days anyway to see how you're doing."

"Thanks, J.C., I don't know what I would have done without you. Would you like to come in for a little while? Michael Junior and Mrs. Weatherspoon are spending the night with Mr. Burrows," she says, and since her reluctance to be alone right now is understandable I say, "Sure," and follow her inside.

The brownstone was built in the early 1900's and strangely enough I seem to notice the three story house for the first time. Prior to today it had only been a setting for several scenes of abuse. The nursery where Michael Junior is spoken of but never seen. The hall closet where Michael kept his tennis racket, his golf clubs, and his wife on more than one claustrophobic occasion. It is also where Barbra hid an extra carton of cigarettes, matches, and a can of air freshener, for those times when she would find herself locked up. Also previously mentioned was the living room where Michael beat her unmercifully many times and where he peed on her equally as often. The spiral staircase which Barbra tumbled down on two occasions. The kitchen where I went with Barbra to put some flowers into a vase, but we were there for such a brief interval that no description seemed necessary. Now, however, I take particular notice in the brownstone. Why, I have no idea at this point. "Be patient," a hundred different publishers, agents, and editors, told me prior to having my first book published, so I beg you readers to bear with me as well, while I scrutinize the setting that I'm certain will be important to the impending plot. The brownstone survived several restorations over the decades and it was remodeled from top to bottom when the Burrows bought it twenty years ago. Today it is a beautiful home furnished with some of the finest antiques that money can buy. Red velvet curtains cover a series of huge bay windows. The walls are covered with original oil paintings, but only the Picasso in the master bedroom is truly valuable. The master bedroom, where Barbra and Michael slept, and fought, and fornicated, is on the second floor. Directly across the hall from the master bedroom is the nursery and next to the nursery is Mrs. Weatherspoon's room, which incidentally was Ludwig's room before his release.

Farther down the hall a guest room and Michael's weight room make up the remainder of the second floor. The third floor is unfurnished and has never been used since the Burrows bought the house. On the first floor Michael built a den for himself when his father gave him the house as a graduation present. The modestly decorated den is situated beside the library, and they are both adjacent to the living room. There are five bathrooms in the house. At length only two other areas of the house come to mind. A damp mildewed basement that has a musty odor, which no amount of cleansing can remove, and a cobweb covered attic, which no character in the forthcoming pages of this book will have the courage to enter, for least I forget to mention that the architecture of the entire house is exceedingly gothic looking. From the outside, however, the house is very much like all the other brownstone buildings on the block. There are no backyards belonging to any of them. They all have what a country person would call "piss poor patches of grass" constituting what could not be called "the front lawn" by even the most urbanized city dweller. The Burrows's residence is the only one that has a rod iron gate and a path of pure marble leading to the front door. A door bell that sounds like the gong in a Chinese emperor's palace and a cock and ball shaped brass knocker on the heavy mahogany door are two separate ways of signaling the occupants inside. As for the ownership of the house I was informed that it now belongs to Barbra. Even though Michael left no will behind Barbra is now an extremely wealthy woman, thanks to the automatic inheritance of her husband's sizable estate, and to Mr. Burrows generosity towards her and his grandson. After being informed of Michael's death he felt a certain obligation towards them both, which he expressed in the only way he knew how. He gave them a great deal of money in the form of a certified check. "I know that Michael could sometimes be an odious man, but I also know that he must have loved you very much, my dear. He would never have married you otherwise," he told Barbra a few days ago while making arrangements for the funeral. Shortly after, I suggested to Barbra that perhaps she should sell the house and move away, and now I am compelled to ask, "Why stay in a place filled with so many painful memories? Every room must remind you of Michael? You must reel every time you open a closet door and remember the endless hours you spent locked inside of it. No matter how many times you tell yourself differently it was not a happy marriage."

"It was a marriage made in hell," Barbra admits most readily to me now, "but I have some pleasant memories. And Michael, in his own warped way, did love me. The sex between us was always sensational. He just had some emotional problems."

"Some? He had several and everyone of them was severe. And what's worse was his refusal to seek out any sort of professional help. He wouldn't hear of going to see a psychiatrist or a psychologist. 'Psychiatrists are for sissies,' he said to me once. 'And punching bags are for people who want something to hit,' I said to him, but he might just as well have been deaf as well as dumb, because he pretended not to hear my first remark and he didn't understand my second: 'You miserable misogynist,' I said.

"What's a misogynist?" he asked me.

"A woman hater," I told him, while he held a hundred and fifty pound barbell over his head for the fifth or the sixth time in a row. We were in his weight room."

"When was this?" Barbra asks me, as we sit down on the duvet together in the living room.

"Not long after you came back from Niagara Falls. After you told me about the beatings I came to see you, but you were out. Michael was here alone. It was the day he fired Ludwig."

"Why did Michael let Ludwig go, he never would tell me?"

"Ludwig threatened to tell Mr. Burrows about the first beating at the brownstone. Michael

paid him off. Anyway, I took the opportunity that day to talk to Michael about his temper. He told me that he didn't hate women. He said he loved you and that's when I suggested that he get some professional help, because sane people don't deliberately hurt the ones they love. He told me to mind my own business."

Barbra, lighting a cigarette, says, "I loved him too and I suppose I always will. I almost jumped in after him when I heard him hit the water. I will never forget his agonizing scream."

A sudden thought occurs to me which causes me to laugh. "He was a hydrophobic."

"A what?"

"He had a fear of water. Don't you remember at Niagara Falls the way he got sick looking down into the gorge of the river?"

"I'd forgotten. Then what a horrible way for him to die."

"I thought it was befitting for the bastard."

"J.C., don't talk that way."

"Well it's over with now. Like I said before it's time to put the past behind you, so I for one won't go on harping about his faults, but there are so many women in the world who aren't as lucky as you. They're still living the perpetual nightmare and they continue to do so, because, for a variety of reasons, they're afraid to leave. You know, Barbra, not every woman can kill her husband and get away with it. So many women married to an abusive husband believe they have to stay. Then eventually they begin to accept the abuse as a way of life. They don't know what else to do or where to go, but there are shelters and support groups for women who fall victim to an abusive husband. And women who stay with an abusive husband, or boyfriend for that matter, have to learn that life will go on without him, and it will go on much smoother. Leaving your tormentor is never the end of the world. It is the first step in the right direction. It can be the beginning of a new and a better life. It bothers me when I hear of women who have remained for years in a violent marriage. It also bothers me to think that brutish wife beaters take such advantage of the fact that they are physically stronger than their spouses. Yet, there is no excuse on earth for a man to ever exercise the strength that he has over women in the physical sense, and there is no reason in the world why a woman should have to succumb to men just because in the physical sense they are usually the stronger sex. Down with the docile wife who thinks it's her duty to suffer the blows her husband delivers. Down with the heavy-handed husband who delivers those blows to begin with. Down with men who mistreat women the world over."

"Amen," Barbra replies, displaying once again that smile that is so becoming, but recently so seldom seen.

"Good, I'm glad to hear you agree."

"I agree with everything you've said, but like it or not love often makes us do crazy things. Sometimes it's so powerful it can blur your perception of the person, the situation, and even yourself if you let it. Love, I have learned, can be overwhelmingly blind."

"That's not love. That's an obsession. An irrational need caused by low self-esteem. It is not what leads a person towards the path of true love. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

"How do you know?" Barbra asks.

"That's not important now. What is important is for the person on the receiving end of any perpetually violent relationship to realize that he or she will never be free until they take a positive stand. The abuser won't stop until the person being abused says, much the same way that your namesake, Barbra Streisand, sang it to the world: 'Enough is Enough!'"

Chapter Eighteen

I am talking with the expatriate American writer Henry James, author of the ghost story *The Turn of the Screw*, when my writing muse makes itself heard. A slave to my muse as always I jump up to jot down an idea in the midst of my conversation with Mr. James. Accustomed to having his own writing muse, Mr. James does not seem bothered by what others might consider to be bad manners on my behalf.

When I return from my writing table a few moments later Mr. James begins where we left off by saying, "Of course when I wrote *The Turn of the Screw* I didn't know for sure there were such things as ghosts. It wasn't until after my own death in 1916 when I became one myself..." Just when Mr. James is about to share with me the story of his becoming a ghost the phone rings. Rising to answer it I apologize once again for yet another interruption.

This time the interruption is brought about by Barbra, whom I haven't seen since the funeral several weeks ago. I've been busy revising Michael's death scene and Barbra's bereaved state of mind, while Barbra has been busy herself with nine month old Michael Junior.

"J.C."

"Barbra, what's the matter?" I ask, for I can tell that something is dreadfully wrong just by the way she says my name.

"He's back."

"Who's back?"

"Michael."

"Back from where?" I casually inquire, since I assume that she is referring to Michael Junior having been to the playground or some such place with Mrs. Weatherspoon.

"I have no idea," she says, because she believes that I too am talking about her dead husband.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"The problem is he's back. Michael is back!" she shouts with a tone of voice that is on the verge of hysteria, and this time there is no mistaking which Michael she is referring to.

"Barbra, at best he's being digested in a shark's belly, and at worse he's at the bottom of the sea," I reply.

"Not anymore he isn't."

"Michael is back?" I ask incredulously, for I can't imagine how he could have survived at sea with a butcher knife in his back?

"Yes, my husband, Michael Bartholomew Burrows, is back."

"What do you mean? How exactly is he back?"

"He's here in the house and he's been beating me."

I am inclined to believe that my heroine has lost her mind. I quickly come to the conclusion that the continual beatings and the part she played in Michael's death have been too much for her to bear. "How?" I ask her with a tone of voice that is wholly disbelieving.

"He came back from the grave," is her bitter reply.

"He was never buried."

"J.C., this is no joke. You have to help me. He won't stop terrorizing me."

"That's impossible. He's dead, Barbra."

"His ghost. Michael's ghost."

"I'll be right over." I hang up and turn to my guest. "Mr. James, you'll have to excuse me, duty calls."

I take a taxi up Park Avenue to Barbra's brownstone. She is standing outside on the marble steps waiting for me. She rushes to the street the moment she sees me in the cab. Before the cab has even come to a complete stop I notice that there are splotches of blood on the housecoat that she is wearing. I can also tell, by her smeared mascara, that she has been crying. I toss a handful of dollar bills to the driver absentmindedly as I step out of the car. We meet on the curb. "What's going on?" I ask.

"It' Michael. Like I said on the phone, he's come back."

"Let's go inside."

"No," she says. "I'm never going into that house again. It's haunted."

"Where is Michael Junior?" I inquire, and then while looking up to the nursery room window I see a movement in Michael Senior's weight room.

"Mrs. Weatherspoon took him over to William Burrows' apartment late last night."

"Come on, let's go inside," I say firmly.

"No, never."

"I'm here. Don't worry, I won't let anything bad happen to you." I suddenly remember making this promise to her on a previous occasion. This time I pray that my writing muse will permit me to keep my promise.

"Leave the gate unlocked," she says, "in case we have to get out in a hurry."

"Don't be ridiculous, come on," I demand and then I boldly open the front door and walk into the house. She follows me in as far as the living room, but she is reluctant to step any farther into the house, or to stay standing in the same spot for any length of time. I notice this abnormality in her behavior by the way she keeps spinning around to look behind her back, as if at any given moment Michael Burrows is going to lay a beating on her from the beyond.

The living room furniture is in an absolute disarray. "It looks like a hurricane hit in here."

"A hurricane by the name of Michael," she says.

Then the next thing I notice is a puddle in the middle of the hardwood floor and the permeating stench of stale urine. "Where is he?" I ask cautiously.

Scanning every inch of the living room with her fearfully alert emerald green eyes, she says, "I don't know. He's somewhere in the house."

"How can you tell?"

"I can feel his presence, can't you?"

"No, but I thought I saw someone through the weight room window."

"Last night he threw a barbell with five hundred pounds of weight on it directly at me. I ducked and it went right through the wall. He's stronger now that he's..."

"A ghost," I finish for her.

"Then you believe me? I thought you'd think I was losing my mind."

I am about to reply when we hear a noise above our heads and simultaneously to our looking up the five hundred pound barbell that she spoke of only seconds ago comes crashing though the ceiling, along with a large amount of plaster and plywood. We both jump back just in time. Barbra one way and myself the other, so that the barbell lands with a deafening thud between us and neither she nor myself are killed, as we would have been if we hadn't moved out of the way when we did.

"Come on, let's go into the kitchen," I say. Taking hold of her hand resolutely I lead her out of the living room. The kitchen looks like it's been hit by a tornado. There are broken dishes, silverware, pots and pans, and utensils, strewn from one end of it to the other. The refrigerator door has been ripped off and is lying on the kitchen floor. The contents of the refrigerator itself have been scattered around the room. Then for no reason apparent to me, Barbra begins screaming. "What is it?" I yell.

"It's him."

"Who?"

"Michael."

"Where?"

"Here."

"Where?"

"In the doorway." Then doubting my inability to see the ghost of her dead husband, she cries, "Can't you see him?"

"I don't see anything," I reply, but the moment I do I see a plate pick itself up and propel itself across the room. A pot following the plate precedes the frying pan that does the same. Next an ornamental knickknack comes off a wall shelf just seconds before the shelf itself zooms by me with the speed of a bullet, which certainly could not have come of its own accord. A ceramic ashtray flies by. It misses its mark, my head, by only an inch. The cupboard doors open and close voluntarily. Then the unseen force that is causing these inanimate objects to move about, namely Michael's ghost, punches Barbra in the stomach with an invisible fist. I helplessly watch her double over and fall to the floor before I even realize what the dead man has done. Able, at least, to help her up I hold her steady, yet I am uncertain about what I can possibly do to protect her from further violence. Perhaps, I won't have to, for now other than the sound of Barbra's sobbing, the kitchen is quiet, and still. Too quiet and too still. Presently, there is no doubt in my mind that Barbra is being stalked by a supernatural presence, even a disbeliever would have to admit that those objects did not just fly across the room of their own volition. Accustomed to having ghosts of my own, I have no problem believing that Michael has returned, but my ghosts are never violent. Jane Austen once threw a pen at me when I was feeling sorry for myself. I told her that I was tired of having my work rejected. I was going to burn the manuscript that I was working on and was never going to write another book, so she whipped a pen at me and called me a "wuss," but I have certainly never been subjected to anything of this nature. I can, however, remember a ghostwriter revealing to me "there are as many different types of ghosts as there are people," namely good ones and bad ones, and that denizens, goblins, ghouls, and poltergeists usually fall into the latter category.

"What am I going to do, J.C.? This has been going on for a week now," Barbra says.

"Is he always this violent?"

"Yes, but right now I think he's than usual because I called you. He warned me not to."

"You should have called me sooner."

"I didn't think anyone would believe me, and besides even when he was alive I never told anybody about the beatings."

"Is he still in the room?" I ask.

"No, he's gone down to the basement, but he'll be back."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Last night he was drunk and he told me that he was here to stay. He said he was going to

haunt me for as long as I live. That's when I made Mrs. Weatherspoon take Michael Junior out of the house. He's only a baby, but he knows something is wrong. I have always worried about how our fights would affect him. And the fights are worse now because Michael is beyond reasoning."

I respond by saying, "He always was."

"I guess he wants revenge."

"Well, he's not going to get it," I obstinately reply, and I am aghast to imagine her dead husband in a drunken rage. I am happy to imagine him, however, having to order his hot toddies in a place called hell; and it is my imagination that takes me all the way down to that infamous inferno filled with brimstone and bad people. Michael Burrows, the wife beater, is among the many denizens I see sitting at the bar ordering drinks from the devil itself. Adolf Hitler sits at the other end of the bar bragging about the part he played in World War II to Christopher Columbus, the bloodthirsty Italian navigator, who is said to have slaughtered as many Native North Americans as Hitler did Jews. I am thrilled to see that there are several bar stools already reserved for a host of other dictators every bit as despicable as their dead predecessors; while the rest of the bar is overflowing with a wide variety of the world's most vile: filthy rich evangelists frothing at the mouth, members of the Ku Klux Klan, a group of power hungry government officials, who had the gall, before being sent to this place of purgatory, to call themselves "Good political Samaritans." My mind wanders back to Michael Burrows, the wife beater, and to the blood stain on the back of his shirt from where his wife justifiably stabbed him. He stands up to pay his tab to the devil. After a certain percentage of his soul is signed over to Satan, he turns around and I have the displeasure of seeing the parts of his person that are not covered with tattered clothing, his face, his arms, and his hands, which are white and rotted from the time he spent in the salt water. There are strands of seaweed entwined in his hair that fall down across his face. When Michael starts to leave I am encouraged by my writing muse to follow him, so together we cross through the threshold of hell into the Times Square subway station. Unseen by those in the city Michael creeps into one Manhattan nightclub after another. He spends the evening draining the drinks of preoccupied patrons and busy bartenders. When the nightclubs close he staggers home. Then making himself visible to Barbra in a drunken rage he beats her unmercifully, and it is not until he has finished terrorizing her to the utmost degree does his ghost revel in roaming around the house triumphantly.

My reverie is disrupted by the return of Michael. The door that leads to the basement swings open and Barbra standing beside me releases another shrill sounding scream. "Go away," she yells.

"It's pay back time, bitch," Michael says, but of course I am unable to hear him.

Barbra is shaking in an uncontrolled way. "Help me," she pleads.

"How?" I ask her, for I don't know what to do. What weapon can I use? I can't fight a ghost that I can't see. Yet, something has to be done? How can I have a happy ending if my heroine is doomed to be haunted for the remainder of her life? Without a doubt, I have to do something. "Get ready to die, slut," Michael reportedly says, while I am hurriedly scanning the kitchen for an instrument of defense. There is a knife on the floor, one from the set that Barbra bought in the Caribbean. Though it seems that the second I set my sights upon it Michael picks it up. In mid air it moves towards Barbra slowly and menacingly. "Help me, J.C. Help me," my heroine cries, which brings me to conclude that once again my characters are out of control. I take a pen out of my pocket, which happens to be the same ball point pen that Ms. Austen pelted at me. As the

knife and Michael's ghost move towards Barbra she begins to back away, all the while begging for my assistance. She has climbed onto the counter now, and having gone as far as she can go without actually crawling into one of the cupboards, she is convinced she is going to die. I am unsure myself about whether she will or won't, for not only is the knife very near her now, I had nothing to do with her dead husband's return from the grave to seek vengeance. She grabs at thin air and screams, so I assume that Michael has her within his invisible grasp. Without a moment to waste I beckon my muse and together we write the word: "STOP!" The knife immediately falls to the floor. Then I write something that I should have written in the previous chapter, Michael Burrows obituary. "Michael Burrows jumped to his death in the Caribbean Sea. The guilt of being a scum bag wife beater brought on severe emotional stress, which caused him to commit suicide. He is survived by his beloved wife, Mrs. Barbra Burrows, and their son Michael Junior, whom we pray does not take after his father in any way. Michael is not missed by anyone."

Barbra, I believe, takes a breath of air into her lungs for the first time since that basement door swung open. By the sallowness of her face I would not be surprised if she has been unable to breathe properly since Michael punched her in the stomach. "Is he gone?" she asks, half climbing and half falling down off the counter. "I can't feel his presence anymore. He must be gone. Thank God," she exclaims.

Alone in my room at the Waldorf=Astoria in the absence of any ghosts I take a trip, via my computer, to the cemetery. It is late at night and I am alone when I visit Michael's grave sight. I have to climb the fence, for the gate at the main entrance is locked. There is a full moon and a myriad of stars in the sky, so the night is not as black as I would have like for this story. For anyone wanting to be scared though, let me assure you that the graveyard remains to be an eerie place regardless of the time of day and no matter how bright the night. An overly active imagination is a Godsend to any writer, but it is not a good thing to possess in a graveyard. Tombstones seem to be talking back to the zombies walking about. There are no werewolves wandering within, but if there were I wouldn't be anymore scared than I already am. The night air is awesomely still, so that when a gentle breeze does manifest it makes me feel the wind blowing is alive, and the leaves rustling on the ground, for it was autumn when I wrote this scene, sound like speech patterns of the dead. Standing on Michael's grave I look behind me just to be sure that no one or nothing is there. Convinced that I am completely alone I lean over to read the inscription on his tombstone. Below "Michael Bartholomew Burrows," is the date of his birth and the date of his death, but nothing more. I take out my pen to write a appropriate epitaph: "Rest in Peace," and scarcely having done so I am startled by the presence of a ghost behind me.

"Jane! You scared the hell out of me."

"I'm sorry, you seemed so involved with your writing I didn't want to disturb you."

"Disturb me. You damn near gave me a heart attack sneaking up on me like that."

"You're much too young to have a heart attack," she tells me. "What are you writing that's made you so jittery?"

"I was in a cemetery."

"Bump into anybody I know?"

Not long after being startled back to the Waldorf=Astoria, by Jane's surreptitious entry, Barbra beckons me once more. I am led to believe, by the desperate look in her eyes, that it is a matter of death that drives her to knock on my door. Her clothes are torn. She is covered in blood, and the ghastly looking cut on her forehead appears to be the main source of it. "He hit me with a two-by-four," she tells me, as she comes into my hotel room. "Right after you left he brought it

up from the basement. He'd been hiding down there. Anyway, as soon as I saw him I ran. I locked myself in the library. I don't know what I was thinking. He walked right through the door and..."

To prevent further swelling I put some ice from a bucket into a towel and gently place the preparation on her forehead. When she complains of feeling faint I force her to sit down at my writing table. Looking out the window towards the Random House Building I don't believe she realizes the significance of what she is seeing - a skyscraper stacked full of stories. "Is this where you write?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply.

"This is where my gothic romance started?" she snorts indignantly.

"Not only your romance, your life. You were born on that table. Theoretically I gave birth to you right where you're sitting now."

"I was born in Brooklyn," she snaps with even more indignation.

"Yes, in a way you were."

"I guess this is where you created Michael as well?"

I nod my head.

"Who were you talking to before I knocked?"

"No one," I say, since I see nothing to be gained by saying, "There is a ghost in the room with us." I will say, solely to you readers, that Jane Austen has not left, nor does she seem fixed on doing so in the immediate future. She is sitting on the foot of my bed watching Barbra, who appears to be on the brink of having a nervous breakdown. "He's back, again," she whimpers.

"I gathered that. You were telling us about locking yourself in the library and he came through the door."

"Us?"

"Ah, myself and the readers," I reply.

"Oh right, are they listening?" she asks, and I must tell you that knowing she has an audience has caused her to become self-conscious. Furthermore, she is so ashamed of the story that she is in the throes of telling her voice is almost inaudible to myself and Jane.

"Encourage her to speak louder," Jane says.

"Speak up, Barbra, the reader can't hear you."

"Well," she begins, "he came towards me slowly. He had a smirk on his face. I could see him very clearly. Normally he is always transparent looking, but this time he..."

"Manifested himself completely?"

"Yes, that's it. Anyway, he was dripping wet and covered with seaweed. His skin was white and rotted. His eyes were dark and dead looking. His face was puffy, and his whole body seemed bloated. The knife was no longer in his back, but there was a huge blood stain on his shirt. He told me over and over again how much he loved me. He said he came back from the beyond because he missed me. He told me that after sinking to the bottom of the sea and after becoming a ghost he went up to the cruise ship. It was his face that I saw in the porthole. He was spying on us and planning his revenge. Apparently he got back to New York before we did. He was in the house waiting when you brought me home after his funeral."

"Ha, ha, he must have been hiding in the attic," I tell her. "I thought there was something sinister about it when I was describing the architecture of the house to my readers. Anyhow, go on."

"By now the smirk on his face that I mentioned before had turned into a sneer and he started coming towards me again. I told him that I hated him. I screamed at him to leave me alone. Then

I began throwing an entire set of encyclopedias at him and that's when he hit me with the two-by-four. I was unconscious after that and when I came to I was upstairs in the master bedroom. He had tied me up and he, he..."

"He what?"

"It's so sickening I can't even say it. He smelled horrible and his body was decayed and he, he was inside of me. He was raping me. When he was done he dragged me by the feet down the stairs. He locked me in the hall closet. I tried to untie myself, but he must have made sure the ropes were secure, because no matter how hard I tried I couldn't get them off. About an hour later he pulled me out of the closet and he raped me again and then he locked me back in the closet. This time he didn't tie me up. Instead, to make sure that I wouldn't escape, he placed a chair in front of the door. I fell asleep, so I don't know how long I stayed in there. I woke up to the sound of many voices."

"Whose?" I ask.

"Other ghosts. I know it's hard to believe, J.C., but it's true. There were at least twenty of them. I could see them through a crack in the closet. They were having a party. Drinking beer and whiskey they smashed all the remaining furniture in the living room. I covered my ears, but I could still hear their ghoulish laughter. Then with Michael leading the way they all crowded around the closet, and, and..."

Barbra is no longer on the brink of having a nervous breakdown. It would be my guess that she is in the process of having one. She has fallen to the floor and is, in fact, convulsing.

Poking their heads through the walls of the closet the ghosts proceeded to "Boo" her. Michael opened the closet door and found her cowering in one corner. With the help of the other ghosts he pulled her out. She fought to stay right where she was, because for the first time ever that small dark closet was a preferable place to be. She grabbed hold of a golf club and began swinging it wildly about at her assailants. The ghosts just jeered, for of course the golf club was given to go right through them. Surrounded by the spectral beings in the middle of the living room, Barbra was shocked to see that one of the ghosts looked exactly like Adolf Hitler. He had a mustache and he was wearing a Nazi uniform, and taking a long hard look at her he said disparagingly, "You're a stinking Jew."

"And a whore," Michael said, "but she's my wife, so you leave her alone, Mr. H." Then he sent Barbra into the kitchen to get some beer for his "buddies." When she returned she heard one of the ghosts say something about "a gang bang," but after a brief struggle with two or more of them she blacked out. By the time she regained consciousness she was lying naked on the hardwood floor. The house was empty. All the ghosts had gone. With an assortment of cuts and bruises all over her body, Barbra put on her torn clothes, ran out the front door, hailed a cab, and came directly to my hotel room.

"You have to help me, J.C.," she said, just as the paramedics arrived. "He's kkkk...illing me," she cried during the course of yet another convulsion. The haunted helpless look on my heroine's face alone was enough to cause tears to come to my eyes. Filled with pity I watched her being wheeled out of my room on a stretcher by the paramedics. Not long after I listened sadly to the sound of the ambulance siren on the street below, which proceeded in taking Barbra to the psychiatric ward of the nearest hospital. Hereafter, I realized that murdering Michael, as enjoyable as it had been, was not the answer. It was far from being the feasible and fun-filled solution that it seemed to be when writing, "I grabbed him by the feet and flipped him headfirst over the railing."

Now, with my heroine having been viciously raped and hospitalized for having gone over the edge herself, I can see only one possible and permanent way to put an end to this nightmare of a marriage. It is the thing that Barbra wanted to do when the domestic violence first erupted in Niagara Falls to rid herself of Michael Burrows. It is the thing that every battered bride must do.

Chapter Nineteen

There is a message for me at the front desk; a note left by my literary agent, Mr. Morris. "J.C., I've just finished reading the book. Call me when you get back. I've got good news and bad news. W. Morris."

Phoning his agency from my hotel room the moment that I return the secretary who answers informs me that Mr. Morris is on another line. Would I like to be put on hold? No, I would not like to be put on hold. "Tell him to phone me back at the Waldorf=Astoria." Five minutes later the phone rings. It is Mr. Morris, but meanwhile, Jane has just arrived to inform me that several of the ghosts got together and decided to throw me a party tonight to celebrate the completion of my novel.

"I wasn't supposed to tell you," she says, "so act like you're surprised."

"Where is it being held?" I ask, and why wouldn't I wonder where in the city myself a hundred or more ghosts can safely gather.

"On the rooftop," she replies.

"Which rooftop?"

"The roof of the Waldorf=Astoria. We can't very well rent the ballroom," Jane says. "Unless you want to be seen mingling about by yourself?"

"What time?" I ask.

"The rendezvous is at midnight..."

"Just a minute, Jane, my agent's on the phone. Hello, Mr. Morris."

"Who were you talking to?"

"Myself, sir. Did you read the book?"

"Yes, I did."

"And what did you think?"

"Well, first of all I don't like the title Staying at the Waldorf=Astoria-bout Wife Abuse for three reasons. It's too long. I don't like the hyphen. It's not catchy enough, and the hotel might sue for libel."

"That's four reasons."

"I think it would be better to call the book The Battered Bride."

"Was that the good news or the bad?"

"That was no news. The bad news is I don't think it will sell. I'm afraid the public won't go for it."

"Why? What's the matter with it?" I ask in anger, for all of my dreams of becoming a best-selling author are being destroyed by a single phone call.

"For one thing it doesn't have a happy ending."

"Of course it does. They got divorced," I declare and for many reasons I am obliged to

remember the phone call informing me about the end of their marriage fondly.

Against my wishes right after her release from the hospital Barbra had moved back into the brownstone. I waited for a few days and then I went to visit her there for the last time. Michael was in the basement. I guess there was something appealing to him about the dampness and the mildew down there. His ghostly snoring could be heard (solely by Barbra) throughout the entire house. "I wish he'd wake up. He's been sleeping all day and his snoring is driving me crazy," Barbra informed me. She also told me that as of lately she was going to a support group for battered women, so I was more surprised than I should have been to see a whole new batch of bruises on her from the night before. "He came home drunk last night and in a bad mood as always," she sighed.

"I've decided that you're going to divorce him. You should have done it while he was alive, but like they say, better late than never. First of all you are going to pick up the phone of your own free will and call the police. You are going to charge him with assault. Then tomorrow morning we'll go see a lawyer together."

She is skeptical about her, or anyone else, being able to divorce a dead husband. "Can it be done?" she asks.

"I don't imagine it ever has been, but why not? It's plausible. Precedents are always being set. That's how society progresses."

The following morning we meet in Midtown Manhattan outside of an office building noted for having some of the best divorce lawyers in the land. I notice that Barbra's hands are shaking when she removes her gloves to light a cigarette. It is snowing heavily. It is actuality the first snowfall of the season, so it could be the cold that is causing her to tremble? I am more inclined to believe, however, on account of her determination to smoke another cigarette, that it is the stress of coming here today to end her marriage which is making her anxious. One does not have to be a highly trained psychologist to know that she remains reluctant to let go of Michael. I truly believe it was her undying, not to mention death defying, love for Michael that brought him back to begin with from the beyond.

"Take a deep breath, and try to relax," I tell her in the elevator on our way up to the lawyer's office; and although her extreme nervous state did not exhaust itself until long after we accomplished what we came to do Barbra succeeded in maintaining a brave front.

The lawyer, an impressive looking man in his late thirties or early forties, greeted us with an even smile, as he invited us into his office. "Have a seat," he said, while sitting down himself in a swivel chair behind a large wooden desk. He waited until we were both settled in the pair of opposing, plushly upholstered, chairs and then he asked, "How can I help you?"

"I need to file for a divorce," Barbra said, and I had never been more proud of my heroine than I was at that very moment.

"All right, we'll get you to fill out a few forms, but first give me your husband's name, and the name of his attorney, if he has one? I'll need a record of his finances. Are there any children involved and if so are you suing for custody? What property do you jointly own? Has he had any extra marital affairs, that you know of..."

"He's dead," I blurted reluctantly to the lawyer.

"Who is?" he asked, looking from me back to Barbra.

"Her husband," I said.

"You want to divorce your dead husband? I don't understand?"

"He's a ghost," I answered.

"Last night he beat me for about the millionth time. He'd been drinking as always, and... Anyway, J.C., finally convinced me to charge him with assault."

"Your dead husband's ghost was drunk and he beat you?"

"Believe me, sir, nobody I know can out drink a ghost. You can take my word for it."

He nodded his head several times up and down in obvious disbelief. "And you charged him with assault?"

"Yes," Barbra replied.

"What did the arresting officer's have to say?"

"They thought we were both crazy of course," I confessed to the lawyer, whom I'm sure was thinking the same thing at the time.

"No doubt you both are," he said and then he had the audacity to laugh out loud.

"Only until they saw all the bruises on Barbra, and certainly not after Michael himself attacked them," I interjected.

"Your husband attacked the police?"

"Attacked them? He bludgeoned them right out of the house. He was furious."

"I see," said the lawyer, now shaking his head from side to side.

"Actually, no one but Barbra can see him, although I saw his outline in a window once, but the police couldn't see him."

"And where is he now? I don't suppose he's in jail?"

"Hardly," I replied. "You can't put handcuffs on a ghost. He's at home."

"Huh, huh, well, will he sign the divorce papers?"

"No, he refuses to give her a divorce."

"Couldn't you get a judge to grant me one?" Barbra asked.

"I don't know on what possible grounds?"

"Good God, on the grounds that he is a wife beater. On the grounds that I don't love him anymore. On the grounds that I want him out of my house for good and out of my life forever."

Bravo, I thought to myself in regards to Barbra's long awaited, and much needed, emancipation from Michael Burrows. Then I made it a point to tell the lawyer about my willingness to be a witness. "I can testify in court under oath to everything I've seen. And you yourself can see that she is covered in bruises. This wretched looking woman used to be the most beautiful hooker on the Lower East Side until she married Michael Burrows. Since then her life has taken a progressive plunge. To be perfectly frank, Michael has been using her as a toilet for almost two years now."

"I'll see what I can do," the lawyer said at last, and then together we left his office rejoicing.

Thereafter, I convinced Barbra, albeit a struggle on my behalf, not to go back to the brownstone. She agreed to move temporarily into William Burrows' penthouse apartment on Central Park West, and he was thrilled to have her and his grandson as guests. Michael Junior, a toddler by now, was just starting to walk when I visited them at the penthouse. Michael Senior never ventured to pay a visit to his father's apartment, so hoping against all odds that he might be gone I went by the brownstone that same evening to search for some sign of his existence. To my disappointment every room in the house was lit up and sure enough I saw a shadowy figure float by the master bedroom window. I could clearly see that the house was a shambles inside, but I was told that this was not the reason for the failure of the "For Sale" sign hanging on the front gate blowing back and forth in the winter wind. Barbra, who had put the place on the market, had not been able to sell the house, because rumors of the brownstone being haunted succeeded in

scaring off every potential buyer. Deeming it to be unsafe for me to go inside, and having no reason to do so anyway, I instructed the cab driver to keep on going. From my room at the Waldorf=Astoria I phoned Barbra to inform her that Michael was still occupying the premises. Then it was not until the spring of that year that I finally got the phone call that I had been waiting most of the winter for. Not long after our visit to the lawyers office a trained team of parapsychologists had visited the brownstone to determine for the courts if there really was a ghost. Of course Michael had kept himself hidden, but after a few days he inadvertently revealed himself when returning home drunk. He had forgotten that the house was set up with sophisticated surveyance cameras especially designed for the filming of ghosts. He was standing in the middle of the living room when he realized his spectral figure was being taped. By then it was too late, and subsequently he lost his temper. One of the parapsychologists said he had never seen such a violent manifestation. Suffice to say, after undergoing a highly publicized court appearance, Barbra was granted a divorce.

"Hello, J.C."

"Barbra, how are you?"

"I'm fine."

"How's Michael Junior?"

"He's good. He's going to be starting preschool soon."

"That's wonderful. Why are you calling?"

"I've got good news. Hold onto your hat."

"What is it? You sound so excited?"

"Guess what came in the mail today?"

"A rejection letter," I jest, for it was the first thing that came to mind, being that I have received so many of them myself over the course of my career.

"No, silly, my divorce papers. The divorce is final and guess what else?"

"What?"

"I found a buyer for the house, but at the last minute I decided not to sell. I've moved back into the brownstone."

Believing that her and Michael have gotten back together for some unearthly reason, and in some supernatural way, I shout, "Don't come running to me the next time that bastard lays a beating on you. I've had it with you, you masochist."

She laughs. "You don't understand. Michael is gone."

"Oh," I say with a sigh of relief, yet at the same time I am not completely convinced. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. When I got here he was hiding up in the attic. I told my mother, who's moved in with me, and Mrs. Weatherspoon to take Michael Junior into the kitchen. Then I called my ex-husband down to the living room. Right away he wanted to know where I'd been all winter. I told him it was none of his business. Then I told him that I'd been to see a lawyer. He called me a fucking something or other, but I was no longer afraid of him. I shoved the divorce papers right into his rotting face. He raised his hand to hit me. I said, 'Don't you dare.' Then I told him to get the hell out of my house and to never come back. It was the most liberating experience of my life, J.C. He was stunned and without saying a word he started to leave. 'Hey, asshole, you forgot something,' I called out, because I must admit that I was getting a little cocky by then. He stopped at the front door with his head slumped down. 'What?' he asked.

'You forgot to say good bye.'

'Good bye, Barbra.'

'Good bye, Michael,' I said in return, and it was one of those rare magical moments that some movie star is going to have a hard time trying to recreate if the saga of my life story is ever portrayed on the silver screen. And not only was I sensational, J.C., I was successful, because the bastard is gone for good. I'm a free woman. In fact, you might want to let your readers know that I'm using my maiden name now."

"This is terrific, Barbra, I'm very happy for you."

"Oh, and guess what else?"

"What?"

"I quit smoking, and this afternoon I signed myself up for singing lessons. La, la, la, la..."

That was the last time I ever heard from Barbra Lovenstein, but my writing muse assures me that she is doing well, living a new and better life.

"Listen, Mr. Morris, just because they didn't walk off into the sunset together holding hands, or awake in wedded bliss at the dawn of each new day, doesn't mean a damn thing. Barbra is more content than she's ever been. She doesn't need a hero to live happily ever after. And more importantly she will never allow herself to become The Batter Bride ever again. So, sir, all I can say is hip, hip hurrah for the heroine."

"Well, another problem I have with the book is the part about Michael coming back as a ghost. It's too far fetched for the sophisticated reader. Most people do not believe in ghosts."

"What would you say if I told you that Jane Austen is in the room with me right now?"

"I would say you're insane."

"Well, I'm not. I have met more than a hundred ghostwriters and many of them have read the book. They don't find anything farfetched about it. As a matter of fact I'm meeting most of the ghostwriters tonight on the rooftop to celebrate my having written it."

"J.C., I can't believe you're telling me this. I don't know what to say. Have you ever considered seeing a psychiatrist? The very idea of you conversing with dead writers, or ghostwriters as you so graciously call them, is ludicrously absurd and borderline psychotic."

To keep from losing my temper I tighten my grip on the receiver and calmly state, "Every word of what I told you is true." He infuriates me further with a self-indulgent and exasperated sigh, so to refrain from slamming the receiver down in his ear I ask, "What was the good news?"

"They're going to publish it anyway."

I gently hang up the phone. I am happy that for once I did not let my emotions rule the rest of me. I am happy that I kept my "terrible temper" intact. I am happier still for my heroine, and grateful as well, because had it not been for Barbra Lovenstein's courage during the denouement of the book to deal with Michael Burrows rationally by getting a divorce, I would not have had a happy ending. "Hip, hip, hurrah for the heroine," I say once more with a smile.

"Amen," says Ms. Austen.

Chapter Twenty

"Are you ready yet?" Jane shouts to me through the bathroom door where I am in the midst of brushing my teeth.

"Almost," I reply with a mouth full of paste.

"Well hurry up," she says impatiently, for apparently the party is in progress. Most of the ghostwriters have already arrived and are waiting for us on the rooftop.

"I'll have to be careful not to get caught going up to the roof," I say when coming out of the bathroom. Being that I am not invisible and since the roof is strictly off limits to anyone, except the security guards who work at the hotel, I plan on sneaking up as surreptitiously as possible with Jane's help. My room is not large enough to hold even half of the ghostwriters that are expected to come and Jane was right when she said I could not be seen mingling about by myself in the ballroom.

"I'm wearing all black, to blend in with the night," I point out to Jane when I am almost finished dressing. A black sweater is the last garment that I have to put on, for a few minutes ago Jane warned me about the wind. "You might want to wear a sweater or a jacket," she had suggested.

"Everybody will be bringing their own refreshments," she says to me now after I inquire about the ghostwriter's propensity for large quantities of food and drink. "Emily Dickinson is bringing a portable CD player and Oscar Wilde's got the new Red Hot Chili Peppers CD," she adds.

"Does that mean there are going to be bottles of liquor and cartons of food floating up to the rooftop?" I ask her while we are in the hallway; and I am in the process of locking my hotel room door when I remember my manuscript. "Wait here, I forgot to bring the book." I go back into my room and off my writing table I retrieve a printout of my book *The Battered Bride*. I carry it with me, as I follow Jane up to the forty second floor of what is commonly called the Waldorf Towers. I reach the roof's entrance without being seen only to discover that "The door's locked and I can't walk through it."

"I'll open it from the other side," Jane offers. Then she disappears through the heavy metal door. "Don't forget to act surprised," she deliberately shouts into my ear, while poking only her grinning face back through the door. And while waiting for Jane, the joker, to open the door I wonder aloud "What's taking her so long?" She should have it unlocked by now. Yet, several more minutes go by before the door opens slowly and seemingly of it's own accord, which of course it could not have done. Jane is gone, however, and I can see no other ghosts in the vicinity. Seemingly alone I step out onto the windy rooftop. To my left I am able to look out over the skyline of New York City and it suddenly dawns on me that maybe Mr. Morris was right? Maybe the ghostwriters were all just figments of my mad imagination? Perhaps, I am borderline psychotic, or schizophrenic, and my bevy of imaginary friends are simply a symptom of some sickness, yet no sooner do I conclude that I am crazy when suddenly on all sides of me more than a hundred ghosts manifest themselves simultaneously and shout: "Surprise!" Laughing at myself for doubting their existence, and putting Mr. Morris's misgivings into the back of my mind, I find that I truly am surprised.

Drawn directly into the party I express a series of salutations. "Hi. Hi. How are you? Oh, I'm fine. Thanks, you too. Hi. Hello. Pretty good. Thanks. Hi. How are you? I'm fine. Yourself? I just finished. Writing another one? Who knows? Hi. Yes, it's a lovely night for this rendezvous. Hi. No, I didn't know. Yes, they're going to publish it. Thanks. Fine. Yourself? Hi. How are you? Oh, yes, I was surprised. Jane tricked me by saying there was a pigeon trapped up here. Jane, there you are. I'm telling everyone that you tricked me by saying there was a pigeon trapped on the roof. Oh, hi. I'm good. Hi. Hi. Hi. Nice to see you again."

"Homer."

"Who?"

"Homer, the author of The Iliad and The Odyssey. I heard that he's here?" one of the ghosts standing directly behind me says to another.

"Homer hasn't arrived yet," says the ghost of Colette, the pen name of the French novelist, whose book *Cheri* is the bittersweet story of an older woman's love affair with a selfish boy. Colette died in Paris on August 3, 1954. It is the ghost of O. Henry, a pseudonym for the American short story writer, whose best known story is *The Gift of the Magi*, to whom Colette tells about Homer's not having arrived.

Sinclair Lewis is standing on my right. The American writer with the classic novels *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Dodsworth*, to his credit, is telling everyone that at the next party we are all to put our Pulitzer Prizes and our "Nobel nothings" into a big melting pot.

"Sinclair Lewis refused the Pulitzer Prize, but oddly enough he accepted the Nobel Prize in 1930," comments the English author of *The Jungle Book*, Rudyard Kipling. Wearing a suit and a tie the partially bald man is sporting a pair of bushy black eyebrows and he is smoking a cigarette in a most contemplative manner. Mr. Kipling seems content to keep the Nobel Prize that he won in 1907.

Joseph Conrad, standing next to Mr. Kipling, has nothing to say on the subject. I, however, have something scathing to say to Mr. Conrad about his bigotry towards "blacks," but I won't. I will say, solely out of respect for his talent, that his best known novels *Nostromo* and *Lord Jim* rank among many of the masterpieces left behind by the great modern English stylists such as:

The English author H.G. Wells, who has just arrived. The mighty master of science fiction with such classics as *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* to his name; a name that is famous throughout the world, whether one is a fan of science fiction or not.

"A case could also be upheld against Mr. Wells for racial prejudice, but a party is not the place for pointing fingers," I whisper, and I am unaware that my comment is overheard by the far more famous, and also present, Mark Twain, a pseudonym for Samuel Clemens. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and its sequel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are two of his most celebrated books about Life on the Mississippi, which is another book by the world renowned writer Mr. Twain, who happens to be here with his wife Olivia, and together they are talking to:

D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda. The four ghosts are discussing in length *Sons and Lovers*, a novel by Mr. Lawrence. I would love to discuss with them *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, another novel by Mr. Lawrence, but at the moment I am talking with:

Theodore Dreiser, author of *Sister Carrie*, the controversial book that began his career, and *An American Tragedy*, the book that was based on an actual murder case and was made into a motion picture called *A Place in the Sun*, starring Shelley Winters, Elizabeth Taylor, and Montgomery Cliff.

While chatting with Theodore Dreiser I am close enough to Sean O'Casey, the Irish dramatist, to hear him laughing. I am informed enough to know that his play *The Plough and the Stars* was a truthful enough depiction of Irish people to incite an angry audience into a riot. I am not knowledgeable enough, nevertheless, to recount the reason for his laughter, but I surmise that something amusing was said only moments ago by:

Henry Fielding, the English novelist, whose farcical play *Tom Thumb* is the most popular of the twenty five plays that he penned during his lifetime, while his novel *Tom Jones* is considered by critics to be one of the many English masterpieces. Regrettably again I do not have the honor of hearing yet another humorous remark made by Mr. Fielding, for at the time I am too busy being introduced to:

Miguel de Cervantes, the Spanish writer, whose novel *Don Quixote* is regarded as one of the greatest masterpieces of world literature. Prior to our introduction, Mr. Cervantes says he was discussing the life of the writer with:

John O'Hara, who nods and smiles politely when Mr. Cervantes introduces us. His book *Butterfield 8* is the story of life in New York City. To my recollection he also wrote *A Rage to Live* and of course his highly acclaimed first novel *Appointment in Samarra*. Plus, 225 of his short stories were published in *The New Yorker* magazine. "More than any other writer living or dead," he assures me, and since I have never had anything published in any magazine (albeit I only write books) I decide to go over and introduce myself to the ghost of:

Gustave Flaubert, the French novelist. His best known book, *Madame Bovary*, was the subject of a famous legal case. Himself and his publisher were prosecuted on the grounds that the book was immoral. "We were both acquitted," Mr. Flaubert informs me with a French accent. "Though the novel's reception was besmirched by scandal, and it was some time later before it gained recognition as the masterpiece that it is today!"

In due time I turn my attention towards the ghost of the ancient Greek writer of fables, known to the modern world as Aesop. He is sitting near the edge of the roof with:

John Bunyan, the English writer, who wrote the religious allegory, that I'm sure you are all familiar with, whether you have read it or not. It is called *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

My intentions of introducing myself to these two men are put on hold by Jane Austen, who grabs not only my attention, but she gathers the attention of all the ghosts as well by banging a spoon on the side of the glass she is holding in her hand. Then she graciously gets them to toast my novel. As the ghostwriters raise their glasses and drink to *The Battered Bride* I am obliged to act as humble, as I was earlier obliged to act surprised.

With the toast completed I continue to mingle amongst the many ghostwriters gathered on the rooftop. Surrounded by so many gifted men and women it occurs to me, as it has before, how desperately I wish I were one of them. And it is this desire that eventually leads me over to the edge of the roof. There is a way, I think to myself, but do I have enough nerve? It takes all of my courage just to look down at Lexington Avenue - let alone bravery enough left over to leap from the top of this building. Therefore, in regards to my having enough nerve, the answer is no. I am about to turn away from the edge of the roof, on account of my fear of accidentally falling off, when Jack London comes up behind me. He acknowledges me with a nod of his head and carries on towards Ernest Hemingway, who is talking with Virginia Woolf. I can overhear Mr. Hemingway telling Ms. Woolf that "a writer is not a writer until he has readers." It crosses my mind that all three of these writers killed themselves. If you remember, Ms. Woolf drowned herself in a tidal river, and Mr. London died of a lethal dose of morphine sulfate, while Mr. Hemingway got out of bed on a Sunday morning, selected a twelve gauge shotgun, loaded it, turned the gun against himself, and pulled the trigger. The blast blew off the back of his head on July 2, 1961.

Remaining at the edge of the roof for a variety of reasons, I gaze at the Random House Building across the way, never before have I had such an unobstructed view of the publishing house. Longing to be revered like the writers all around me I step out onto the ledge. For someone, such as myself, who has always had a pathological fear of heights, commonly and clinically called acrophobia, it is an incredibly long way down to the ground. Presently, I am unaware that behind me the party has come to a halt. It isn't until the music of the Red Hot Chili Peppers is no longer playing that I become cognizant of having captured the attention of each and

every one of the ghostwriters. The atmosphere of the rooftop rendezvous changes dramatically. They can see that something more momentous than the completion of my book is about to happen, and their eagerness for some excitement is self-evident by their cheering me on. "Jump, J.C., jump. Jump, J.C., jump. Jump, J.C., jump..." Then a singular voice from within the crowd calls, "J.C., are you sure that this is what you want?" I recognize the voice to be that of my good friend Ms. Austen.

"Yes," I reply, "but it's so far down. I'm afraid. I don't think I can do it." A gust of wind comes up from around one corner of the building, but I manage to remain firmly rooted. I am, however, teetering precariously on the ledge when I turn to the group of ghosts directly behind me. "Could one of you come with me?" I ask.

Mr. Hemingway, Mr. London, and Ms. Woolf, are all willing to assist in my suicide, but Jane steps forwards and offers to help. "I'll do it," she says, and then, per my request, she enters my body.

"Are you sure that this is what you want?" she inquires telepathically from within me.

"I'm positive."

"Have you forgotten there is no glory in being a ghostwriter?"

"I'm not in it for the glory. If I was I would have given up writing long ago. Let's just get it over with," I tell her.

"If you're positive this is what you want?"

"I am. But can you make certain there are no pedestrians passing by."

"There aren't," she tells me.

"Can I close my eyes?"

"You can if you want, but I guarantee you'll open them again on your way down."

"Don't talk about it, just do it," I exclaim, and having done so the onset of my long descent begins. Jane jumps. With no will whatsoever over the operation of my legs I feel myself leaving the ledge. I feel myself falling. I feel her with me all the way. I feel somewhat comforted to have her inside of me for the entire forty two story fall. It is not until just prior to impact that she departs. "You were only about fifty feet from the pavement when I left your body," Jane informs me after the fact, which I now refer to as "the fall."

Just before jumping off the ledge with Jane, and then while plummeting at an incredible speed towards the ground, I had realized that I was rapidly approaching my death, but I did not look at it as a grievous event. On the contrary I considered the ending of my life to be a cause for celebration, for in regards to my writing career death would hopefully bring about all the recognition that I had always dreamed of having. The journey itself, however, was far from being joyful. At best it was a bad dream, and Jane was right when she said that I would open my eyes involuntarily. She failed to mention, though, my inability to breathe, and the scream of terror that escaped from my mouth. "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa." SPLAT! was the next sound followed by the sound of screeching tires from the car that skidded to a stop, which preceded the sound of a woman's scream from across the street by only a few seconds. I was able to hear all of the above, for right after hitting the pavement, at however many hundreds of miles per hour, my spirit abandoned my severely broken and extremely bloody body.

Now, only moments after "the fall," I am delighted to be free of my flesh, and I feel fully vindicated to find myself floating in what scientific phenomena experts refer to as the fourth dimension. Looking down at my former self, sprawled out on Lexington Avenue, I hear the sound of an ambulance siren as it approaches. Policemen, putting up barricades to block off

traffic, tell a crowd of people, apparently mesmerized by my corpse, to stand back. In one of my hands I am happy to see my manuscript, which I managed to carry with me all the way. The Battered Bride will now be published posthumously, and it gives me great pleasure in knowing that I have left no unfinished work behind.

"Any identification on the corpse?" one of the police officers ask.

"Yeah, he's got a birth certificate. It say's his name's Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook."

"Isn't he a writer?"

"Not anymore. Now he's just another stiff in the morgue."

"What's that he's got in his hand?"

"Looks like a manuscript."

"It must be important for him to have held onto it all the way down."

"I suppose so," says one of the officers.

"Anybody know why he jumped?"

The first officer to arrive on the scene gestures with his thumb towards the Waldorf=Astoria, and says, "He was staying at the hotel. I just spoke with one of the night managers. He said the guy was a real loner. He was always seen talking to himself. Spent all of his time locked up in his room writing."

Eager to return to my guests, now that I am also a bona-fide ghostwriter, I begin moving awkwardly about. Jane, standing on the sidewalk already smiling, laughs when she sees me trying to get acquainted to my newly acquired structure. "You'll grow accustomed to being a ghost," she says. "It just takes a little getting used to."

In returning to the ghost-ridden rendezvous on the rooftop a fire hydrant is the first inanimate object that I walk through. The doors leading to the lobby of the Waldorf=Astoria are the second solid structure incapable of impeding my progress. I get on the elevator with Jane and when it lets us off at the top of the Waldorf Towers we walk through a wall or two, the heavy metal door, and then we are back on the rooftop. Here I am honored to learn that Jack and Ernest and Virginia have been waiting anxiously for me. While thanking them for their congratulations on my becoming a ghostwriter, I realize that I am no longer uncomfortable calling my predecessors by their given names. I am at ease to do so now, because the ghostwriters have become my ectoplasmic peers. Tennessee (Williams), Leo (Tolstoy), Thomas (Hardy), James (Joyce), John (Steinbeck), Bill (Shakespeare), Herman, the magnificent, (Melville), and many more ghostwriters welcome me wholeheartedly into their world. It is a privilege to have Marcel (Proust) pat me on the back, and shaking hands with Henrik (Ibsen) was just one of the numerous highlights of my evening.

Though, before the night is through, the party over, and prior to roaming around the Random House Building with Jane, I find myself standing in the same spot from where Jane and I jumped. Looking down at Lexington Avenue I can see the coroner bag my body and take it away, presumably to the morgue. The police are sitting in their squad cars eating donuts and doing whatever it is they do when not putting their lives in danger. Reporters are packing up their television cameras and in search of yet another story they leave the scene of my suicide. It is a well known fact that often artists do not receive the recognition they deserve until long after their death. I wonder how many years it will take for the world to discover the literary treasures I left behind? How much longer until all of my novels are referred to as great works of art? How long before some other aspiring author will write: "J.C. Clover-Cook, a Canadian novelist, whose posthumously published masterpiece The Battered Bride was the precipitating factor in putting

an end to wife abuse the world over."

"READ ME," I cry out across the city, craving as I always have for recognition, but of course I am a ghost so no one can hear me verbalizing my anguish and rage from the rooftop - and those stymieing schmucks in the Random House Building across the way, well they never could. Yet, I am convinced that one day victory will be mine, so turning around triumphantly I survey the party that is in full swing. Searching for someone to socialize with I see a tipsy Truman Capote, an outrageous Oscar Wilde, and I am wondering where Walt Whitman is when I see that Homer has arrived, and what an honor it is to have him hurry over to me when I call his name in a casual way. Homer, whom I have never met until now, is a handsome man, whose features and physique are that of a Greek God.

After becoming more acquainted with each other, and after learning everything I ever wanted to know about ancient Greece, I am wondering if I should ask him to manifest himself a little more; while Homer wonders aloud why I chose to write a book about wife abuse. Barbra had once asked me how it was I knew so much about domestic violence and to avoid the question I told her that it was not important. At the time I did not want to reveal to your readers my main reason for writing this book, being that I am a writer who wants to be read.

"And what experience could you possibly have had to give you the ability to write such an authentic story?" Homer inquires further.

To all you readers who are now hankering for the truth, and to Homer, for whom I have nothing to hide, I earnestly reply, "I've been in an abusive relationship."

"You have?"

"Yes, on the receiving end. I am a homosexual, and he was my hero."

"I dare say violence does not discriminate. Was it as bad as what Barbra Lovenstein lived through?" Homer asks with precisely the impassioned tone of voice that I was hoping to hear from this handsome man.

"No, but his name was Michael B_____."

"Then the book was an autobiography," says Homer.

"I guess, in a roundabout way, you could say that it was my gothic romance."